

ゲームズ!

G A M E R S

Sekina Aoi

葵せきな

2

Karen Tendo and surprise happy end

天道花憐と
不意打ちハッピーエンド



ファンタジア文庫

Gamers! - Volume 02 - Tendou Karen to Fuiuchi Happy

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Chapter 1

Amano Keita and the Sold Out Game

The best kind of game is definitely an action RPG with local multiplayer.

...What am I talking about? I, Amano Keita, am creating a

“List of genres that are easy and fun to play with siblings”

—that’s what I was in the middle of doing.

Everything after first place, though, is bunched together. Fighting games, puzzle games, sugoroku, horizontal scrolling games, shooting games, all of these are interesting to play with two people.

However, I still think that an action RPG with local multiplayer is the best type of game to play with a brother. Rather than handheld games like Monster Hunter, hack and slash games that can be played on a single big screen... like that game called Diablo is best.

What is good about these kind of games is that there is the feeling of “playing together”. We aren’t fighting each other, but cooperating. Of course, there has to be some fighting. By introducing the RPG element, it can be played for a very long time without getting tired of it.

Having a sibling means that you see each other every day in the house. Naturally, that also means that there’s way too much free time. When you have too much free time, the ability to have fun together at the same time becomes way more valuable.

When we play in front of the big TV, though, my mom complains and tells us to get out of our room, while dad just eats pistachios and silently reads the newspaper.

This is when I feel the happiest.

If I were to talk about “Games that are fun to play with friends”, though, the

situation is completely different. Since I don't spend long periods of time at home with friends, mobile games that occasionally require cooperation such as hunting games are best.

...Ah, well.

I, Amano Keita, don't have any friends to play hunting games with, so I wouldn't know.

...N-no, don't misunderstand. Before high school... in middle and elementary school, I had close friends. R-really.

Back then, I spent a lot of time in the baseball club, so when I got the chance to play with friends, we would only play fighting games for a short amount of time...

W-well, I, Amano Keita, am a gamer through and through.

As a second-year high school student, I still haven't played any hunting games with friends.

...N-no, let's say that differently.

I, Amano Keita, am a solo player.

I have decided to play alone because I do not want other people to leech off me.

...Yes, that's it. I'll use "Bocchi".^[1]

W-wait, no! I didn't know anyone a month ago... but now I have classmates I can call friends!

Well, that friend is...

"When you say that playing with your brother is your source of happiness, people stop listening."

He's really harsh.

The classroom was really lively and loud in the morning. In the seat in front of me, Uehara Tasuku-san shrugged his shoulders and let out a sigh after listening to me talk..

Even though I wouldn't usually reply, because it was about games, I wanted to object to his words. When I saw him interact cheerfully with our classmates, however, my fighting spirit died back down.

I guess you could call him a riajuu? He has a lot of friends, gets along with everyone, and even has a cute girlfriend. Compared to me, who reverts back to checking my mobile game during breaks, he's the complete opposite.

Obviously, despite being classmates, we've only started talking recently. But because we have a point in common, he's now my friend... or rather, Uehara-kun worries about me.

While he was greeting his classmates, he noticed me fidgeting, and let out another deep sigh.

"Hey, Amano. I'm not saying that you should be like me all of a sudden, but can't you try harder?"

"E-even if you say that..."

Is he talking about trying to make friends? I don't know what he's referring to. Ever since elementary school, I've always thought that "Friends are formed naturally" and that they aren't "forcibly made". Also, I was never good at getting close to people since I was always shy.

Uehara-kun started lecturing me as if he was my dad.

"I've said this multiple times now. Not having friends isn't bad. Of course, spending your time happily with your family is good and all, but you have a goal in mind, right? ...Trying to get closer to Tendo is a really far-fetched goal, but it's your goal nevertheless."

"Ugu..."

That pained me. Because of certain circumstances, I somehow started trying to get closer to Tendo-san.

Attractive, intelligent, and athletic. Even though she's Japanese, she has

blonde hair and blue eyes, and is an existence that has surpassed the level of “riajuu” and approaches godlike status.

For a... mob character like me, trying to get closer to a girl like her is a foolish thought.

Well, there still is a bit of hope, since we are more or less acquaintances. I was given the once in a lifetime opportunity to listen to her speak, and I engraved that memory into my heart...

“Well... Even I don’t think I can continue on like this.”

“I guess.”

Uehara-kun nodded. I balled my fists and looked out the window. ...It reminds me of another cloudy day.

The relationship between me and Tendo-san can be described as tenuous. Not normal, not negative, but extremely thin. Of course, in a bad way.

In the first place, if my relationship with the school idol Tendo-san ended as being acquaintances, I would normally feel privileged. But... because of my actions, her impression of me is not very good (or at least, that’s what I think). I guess you could call it a very big debt?

Because of that, I can’t turn around and go, “Everything’s fine if I just have games!”. I want to apologize to her... no, rather, I want to improve our relationship.

...After all, it’s sad to leave a bad impression on someone who called out to me.

When I resolved myself, Uehara-kun looked over, slightly puzzled but still smirking.

“Well, it’s natural for a man to want to get closer to a beautiful girl.”

“I-it’s not like that!”

“Really?”

“...No... well... Tendo-san is certainly better than anyone else...”

Uehara-kun let out yet another sigh when I blushed and muttered with my

head down.

“... Why aren’t you guys dating already...”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“No, it was nothing—”

“You’re talking as if Tendo-san likes me.”

“Why are you only perceptive in this kind of scene!? You blockhead of a main character!”

“Eeh!? What!? Why are you getting mad at me for getting your joke!?”

There are limits to how unreasonable you can be! Well, he’s probably trying to annoy me by bringing up Tendo-san. Am I that funny to tease just because I’m trying to get closer to the school idol? ...No, from an outsider’s point of view, it probably is funny, huh.

Anyway, we both got too engrossed in the conversation, so I changed the topic.

“Oh right, Uehara-kun, do you want this game?”

“Huh?”

At the sudden change in topic, Uehara-kun tilted his head in puzzlement. Reaching for my bag, I took out a game for consoles. Uehara-kun let out a voice of wonderment.

“Is that Kurikure 3? Wow, you got a copy.”

“Ah, yea, well, I preordered it.”

While Uehara-kun was looking at the package, I lightly scratched my cheek.

Crystal Cradle—or the Kurikure Series for short, is a top-down perspective hack and slash action game. It’s a really popular smash hit with lots of sales, good reviews, and with the release of the third game, is currently in very high demand with low stock. Despite having DLC’s, its price on online auction sites are steadily increasing, and even Uehara-kun knows how difficult it is to get a copy. However...^[2]

I timidly proposed a deal to Uehara-kun, who was eyeing the package in envy.

“Uehara-kun, do you want this...?”

“Ha? Not even lend, but you want to give it to me? That precious thing?”

“Ah, yea.”

In a panic, I tried to explain to him as he tilted his neck in confusion.

“No, I have another copy. Of course, I preordered one. But at the same time, I entered a giveaway on a whim. But I also won the giveaway, so...”

“I see now. Sounds like something you’d do. Well, if that’s the case, I understand, but...”

Uehara-kun made a grim face. When I asked, “What’s wrong?”, he scratched his head awkwardly.

“Wait... Why are you giving this to me?”

“What? Why, you say... I thought that you’d be happy if I gave it to you.”

Uehara-kun suddenly went “Oof” and awkwardly twitched, but cleared his throat and responded.

“I-I’m thankful, but you should probably think about how you use things.”

“Huh? Oh, like selling it online for a high price? Hmm, but I don’t want to do something like that...”

“No, that’s a good idea, but you can probably do something even better.”

“What? What would that be...”

I was utterly confused. Uehara-kun sighed yet again, and with a mischievous smile, held the game right in front of my face.

“First of all, shouldn’t you see whether or not Tendou-san has this game?”

“Oh!”

In that moment, my outburst echoed in the classroom.

*

Uehara-kun was right.

In other words, Tendo-san didn’t have a copy of Kurikure 3 and was looking

for it.

“It looks like she really wants it.”

That was one of my few friends, Misumi Eichi-kun, who was pretty close to Tendo-san.

When I learned of this during the lunch break, I immediately went to Uehara-kun and told him of the news. He was finishing up his lunch with Aguri-san (I got a fierce glare from her—please forgive me). Sitting down in the same seat as he was this morning, he started to think of strategies as if he was trying to do something evil.

“Hey, this is a perfect chance. The way you use this game is going to be a major factor in this love comedy—”

“Ah, by the way, Uehara-kun, do you really not want Kurikure 3? It’s really interesting—”

“Are you an idiot!?”

“Ow!”

He sent a chop towards my head. Why did he have to hit me with all his strength!?

“You’re really a big idiot! If I said ‘I want it’, would you hand it over to me!?”

“Ah, yea, if you said you wanted it, I would give it to you. It’s really interesting... Ow, it hurts!”

He hit me again on the top of my head. Hitting me twice is too harsh... While I was groaning in pain with teary eyes, Uehara-kun started shouting at me with a flushed face.

“What are you doing!? You’re stupid! You’re really stupid!”

“If you’re saying it twice, then this must be really important...”

“Of course! Seriously, you... Well, it’s because you’re like this that I get this worked up...”

“Ehehe, Uehara-kun, do you like me that much—O-ouch!”

He hit me again. Cruel. This is too harsh. I can feel a bump forming on my

head. Even my parent's don't hit me like this. Seriously.

"You... Well, fine. Anyway, I really don't need this game. Just give it to Tendo-san somehow. Put in so much effort as if you'd die any time now."

"W-wouldn't it be really creepy if some otaku tried to give a girl a game like that?"

"W-well, I guess. ...Then try and give it to her casually, in a refreshing manner, but with that much effort."

"This feels like a terrifyingly dark plan..."

With a sigh, I thought over the plan once again.

Putting the game down, I tapped my fingers on the table.

*

"Eh, did Tendo-san not come to the Gamers club today?"

I rushed to the Gamers club room right after school.

Misumi-kun made an apologetic face.

"Sorry, Amano-kun. It looks like I underestimated her desire for Kurikure 3."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, Tendo-san... took a break from club activities today to go look throughout the town to find the game."

"What!?"

"Also, it looks like her phone died. I haven't been able to contact her at all."

"Oh..."

Misumi-kun scratched his head in embarrassment.

"Well, I always thought that Tendo-san was more of the stoic, honors student..."

"Right? Well, in the first place, she joined this school because of the club..."

"Ah..."

We both exchanged wry smiles. Saying my thanks, I left the club room and

started to think more about my plan.

“(Well, should I give it to her tomorrow? ...But, if Tendo-san finds a copy today, everything’s over. No, even if she doesn’t find a copy, she might settle for downloading the game.)”

As I thought, are evil plans bound to be unsuccessful?

Leaving the building, I headed towards the nearby bus stop to go home—not. Rather, I started walking towards the urban area.

“(No, that’s bad! Leaving aside my own feelings, if I gave this to her, she wouldn’t have to waste her money unnecessarily! Alright, let’s try harder! Let’s look for Tendo-san!)”

She’s helped me before. So, if I have even the smallest possibility of helping her, I shouldn’t give up so easily.

With renewed determination, I started jogging down the street.

“(In this area, there should be three places to buy new games.)”

I thought of the best route to look for her. Since I also like games, I frequented this route after school to look at games. But...

“(Since Tendo-san left school a while ago, it might be better to look for her starting from the furthest area first...)”

Instead of following her, there’s probably a higher chance of meeting her if I try to go the opposite way.

Making up my mind, I decided to go to the toy section in the department store that is the furthest from school and has the worst selection of games.

Going up the escalator, I went towards the toy section, feeling a bit out of place. Walking up to the video game display, I looked around for Tendo-san, but I didn’t see her nearby.

“(Looks like she’s not here...)”

Even though she wasn’t there, I wasn’t disappointed. I felt that if I got to find her, it would be a great deal. ...Well, I didn’t really profit though.

Because I didn’t see Tendo-san, I went to the counter to see if there was a

copy of Kurikure.

“Um... well, this area’s pretty messy...”

That’s typical of a department store. There’s something that looks like a new releases section, but there were games from over a month ago. But it looked kind of strange, so it looked great for finding weird games. However— “So, um, Chri... Christmas Idol? So you guys don’t have that game!?”

Suddenly, the voice of a male who sounded too old to be in the toy department rang out. I looked towards the source of the voice.

In front of the counter was a 40-something man who was pressing the clerk for answers. He was wearing a white shirt with the top button unfastened and was holding a jacket in his right hand. It looked like he was an office worker, but he was also wearing chinos, so I .

“(He has a somewhat rough appearance, but still looks strangely handsome...)”

One reason for his rough appearance is because he’s somewhat good-looking, but seeing him desperately asking the clerk for the game looks straight out of a drama.

Feeling slightly nervous, the clerk said, “Like I said, we don’t have the game Christmas Idol at this store...”, but he slammed his fist against the counter and sent an earnest gaze to the clerk.

“In the first place, it might not even be called Christmas Idol!”

“Uh—”

At the same time as the clerk did, I raised my voice. He glanced at me for a second, but turned back to her.

Oddly, my heart started beating faster.

“(W-what is this? Are they actors? It’s completely like they’re on a stage...)”

I felt like they would shout “Oh, god, we have to redo it!?” any time now.

She turned to deal with the customer once again.

“Um, but I don’t really know the name myself...”

“Tsk...! Is there nothing that can be done!?”

He hung his head. ...It was the first time I heard anyone say that in real life.

“(I shouldn’t be sitting around watching... I’m wasting time.)”

I should probably leave right after I confirm that they don’t have Crystal Cradle 3— “Cra... cr, cracking Chestnut Condor! It’s something like that, then the number 3!”

“!?”

I looked over towards the counter. By any chance...

In contrast to me, the clerk was looking up the game “Cracking Chestnut Condor”, and obviously, got the result “No matches”.

“Dammit...! Is it the end of the line!?”

Why are you using that phrase? ...Well, that’s fine, but was he searching for...

While wondering what I should do, he looked over to me and shouted at me.

“You boy, over there!”

“Over there!?”

Again, why is he talking like that?

When I asked “Y-yes?” while trembling in fear, he called out to me with a sharp glint in his eye.

“Shoplifting is a crime!”

“What!?”

Somehow, I was accused of a ridiculous crime. However, he crossed his arms and started nodding.

“It’s ok, it’s ok. It’s ok if you don’t say anything. Everyone does one or two bad things in their youth. Today, I’ll overlook it. Right, Tanabe-san?”

“Yes?”

The clerk—or rather, Tanabe-san, spoke as if she didn’t hear anything. At least

it seems like she didn't suspect me at all. That makes me relieved, but... But...

"...Just go, boy."

"No no no no no!"

Go!? How can I leave in this situation!?

Blood rushed up to my head as I approached him, trying to tell him that I wasn't a shoplifter... I tried my best to tell him.

"I-I think it's Crystal Cradle!"

"...What?"

He blinked in surprise. Before anything else came out, I had to correct the title of the game first. ...I'm hopeless.

At that moment, the clerk went "Oh" and looked it up at the register. It seems like the search yielded a result.

"Crystal Cradle! Was the game you were looking for called Crystal Cradle, sir?"

"Hmm...? ...Oh! It is! It is Crystal Cradle!"

His face brightened up. With a smile, he forcibly took my hand and shook it.

"Thank you, boy! You helped me remember the name!"

Another exaggeration. I wryly smiled and said "No, it was nothing..." but he continued on with a broad grin.

"Alright, for your good deed, I'll forgive your sins!"

"No no no, in the first place, I—"

"It's in stock!"

"Huh?"

The clerk interrupted our conversation.

"The game Crystal Cradle 3 is in stock! There's only one copy, though..."

"Eh!?"

Of course, the man shouted in a panic. That's odd, when I checked, it was already too late...

“W-where is it!?”

He asked the clerk, almost falling over. She said “Give me a second”, but then...

“Oh.”

“...Oh?”

She looked at us with an awkward smile.

“The only copy of Crystal Cradle 3 was just bought.”

“What!?”

Both of us shouted in surprise. Well, I didn’t want it, but questions still arose. Thinking that it probably was Tendo-san that got it, I was feeling regretful.

The clerk was looking around awkwardly. ...? Exchanging glances with the man, we followed her gaze, and...

“...Ah.”

Over there, was another person.

At the counter on the other side of the store, someone was finishing up their purchase, and it was clear that the bag was just the right size for the game.

“Oh!”

At our loud voices, the person who finished the purchase turned around. ... Wait, I just realized, but that uniform... and that hairstyle...

“...Keita?”

“Chiaki!?”

My enemy, Hoshinomori Chiaki, was looking at us with her head tilted in curiosity.



Noticing that I was looking at the shopping bag she was holding, she looked at me with an evil smile.

“Yay~, I got the last copy of Crystal Cradle 3, I’m so lucky, ehehe.”

“Tsk... Chiaki, you...!”

What a bad personality! Why is a girl like her becoming popular at school! N-no, if I think about it, I already have two copies, so her smug smile doesn’t really mean anything... But why do I feel a strange sense of defeat!

Right. Even though I already had a copy, the man next to me, though...

“Y-you! You over there!”

“Hii!?”

The man clearly thought that Chiaki was making fun of him, and shouted at her.

“(Crap!)”

Chiaki, who’s really timid when she talks to people other than me, started trembling with teary eyes. I tried to stop the man.

“W-wait! This is a misunderstanding! Chiaki, don’t do stupid things and just go!”

“Uuh...! ...K-keita, you’re stupid, stupid!

“Why!?”

For some reason, Chiaki ran away in tears. I don’t know why, but she seems to dislike me more. ...Well, that’s fine. I don’t care whether or not she likes me.

“Let go! Let go, boy! You guys were conspiring together, weren’t you! Dammit!”

“You’re misunderstanding everything!”

Trying to calm him down, I explained the situation to him and that Chiaki had done nothing wrong.

When he regained his composure, he bowed his head to both me and the clerk as he said “S-sorry...” in apology.

“I got really into it somehow, as if I was acting on stage...”

“We know.”

The clerk and I both immediately replied, and he bowed once again. And then he said, “Oh, right.” and took out a business card. As expected, the profile written on the card was...

“You’re Miyamoto Satoshi-san, an actor...”

“Yes, for the most part, I always act like I’m on stage.”

He replied with a grin, his white teeth showing. Unfortunately, I’ve never heard of his name, but I feel like he would be a popular celebrity.

He once again bowed to the clerk, said goodbye, and turned his back to the counter. Because I couldn’t stand it anymore, I first said to the clerk, “I really didn’t shoplift!”, to which she replied with a wry smile, “Alright, I got it.” I then promptly said goodbye and left the area.

Of course, I didn’t have anything else to do with the man, but for some reason he followed me and eventually caught up to me, walking side by side with a big smile.

“Fuu... Both you and I have things to reflect on, huh?”

“No, I really don’t have anything to reflect on!”

For some reason, I was included. Is he still doubting me?

While walking, I tried my best to convince him that I really didn’t shoplift. When we approached the entrance of the department store, he said “Well then, bye...” and we separated.

“Sorry for everything, boy! Stay strong!”

“H-hah.”

Miyamoto-san waved goodbye while shouting in a loud voice, while I returned a small bow and hurried away.

“(I somehow met a strange person... Anyway, let’s not lose focus of the goal.”

Once again, I started to look for Tendo-san at the nearby game stores.

The next store is the only electronics store in town. The good thing is that everything there is reasonably priced, but it doesn't focus on games, and so it has a bad selection and bad inventory. It's a place I go to without any expectations from the beginning. If it has what I'm looking for, it's lucky event, not anything ordinary. Well, it's that kind of place.

After walking for five minutes, I arrived at the store. Making my way to the game corner, I looked at the TV in the store that had the news on. ...I'm not a gamer that really cares about the display lag, but I am fascinated by good TVs.

At that moment, a game commercial played on the TV. After watching it to the very end, I arrived at the game corner. However...

"(As I thought, Tendo-san doesn't seem to be here...)"

I would be able to tell if Tendo-san was here in an instant because of her easily recognizable blonde hair and blue eyes. But then again, there were so many people, so I wouldn't know unless she was nearby.

Looking through the store, I checked the shelves, made sure that Kurikure 3 wasn't there, and so I should now— "Do you have the game Tartar Sauce Binge Drinking!?"^[3]

—leave, but at that moment, I overheard another person asking about a game at the cash register. Acting on a hunch, I peeked through the shelves and looked at the situation. Over there...

"It's Tartar something! No, it might not even be Tartar!"

"Uh... yes?"

—The male actor was annoying the clerk and putting him on the spot.

The clerk looked new to the job and looked around for his co-workers, but no one was around. Meanwhile, he—Miyamoto-san kept repeating strange titles.

...I just want to leave. I have things to do. But...

"...Uh, I think this person is trying to ask for the recently released game, Crystal Cradle 3. Do you have any copies in stock?"

"Oh, you're..."

“P-please wait a bit.”

While Miyamoto-san was still surprised, the clerk searched for the game. Miyamoto-san turned to me with a smile at the chance encounter.

“This is good fortune! A blessing!”

“Ahaha... t-thanks.”

I made another awkward smile when he started talking as if he was acting. And then I tilted my head in confusion.

“Why are you here, too? By any chance, are you looking for the same game?”

“Huh? Oh, well, something like that.”

Truthfully, I’m looking for someone who is looking for the game. I didn’t try to explain that since it would be confusing.

Miyamoto-san, with a grim expression, mumbled “Is that so...”.

“It looks like this game is a popular one. ...I should put in more effort.”

“...Um, by any chance, do you normally have no interest in games?”

I asked because I was interested. No, rather, I thought that he would know the name of the title if he had an interest in games.

Miyamoto-san scratched his head in embarrassment.

“Truthfully, yea. I heard that this was really popular these days, so I became interested. But I haven’t been able to find it anywhere, so I was starting to get annoyed.”

“Hah... I see.”

I didn’t know Kurikure was popular enough to attract the attention of non-gamers. That would certainly cause stock to drop a lot quicker, too.

“(...Although, in that case, I wish people that are more interested in games would be able to get a copy... At least, if there was only one copy and both Tendo-san and this man were there, I would definitely want Tendo-san to get it.)”

In this case, it’s not that bad, but if people who weren’t interested didn’t buy

any copies, the ones who actually played games would be able to buy it.

While I was thinking, the clerk gave us the bad news.

“Ah, it looks like Crystal Cradle 3 is not in stock. I’m sorry.”

“I see... Alright. Sorry for troubling you. Well then!”

Miyamoto-san left the place in a gallant manner. I also started walking in the same direction. He was scratching his cheek and mumbling to himself.

“Umu, not here too. Money isn’t a problem, but rather...”

“Then you can find them on online auctions, you know.”

“No, that’s a bit different. I want to have it in my hand, not shipped to me later. I would be able to pay anything for a copy.”

“Hah...”

I could understand his sentiment. If there was a game I really wanted, I would search everywhere for it and buy it for a fixed price without any discounts.

Facing the exit, I said my goodbye, and walked away.

Behind me, I heard Miyamoto-san talk to himself in a loud voice.

“Ah, isn’t there anyone that has a copy of the game...”

flinch

“If someone had it, I would negotiate anything for it...”

shudder

I tried to look behind me. ...I don’t feel like anyone’s staring at me. It looks like he’s actually talking to himself. ...A monologue, is it? Well, he is an actor, so...

Suddenly, our eyes seemed to meet, and I turned around in a panic.

“(If he learns that I have an extra copy, then this’ll become really troublesome...!)”

Tensing up, I quickly walked out of the building.

Walking fast enough to be about of breath, I reached the last store... It was a game shop that I frequently visited.

“(...I have to be careful to not meet that person again!)”

I headed towards the game shop using a road that I didn't use very often. It wasn't much different from walking on the main street, but it's narrow and dark, so I preferred the main road.

“(Anyway, I probably won't meet Miyamoto-san on this road... but wait a second!)”

While walking, I realized an important point.

“(That also means Tendo-san probably doesn't use this road!)”

What should I do? Because I was too occupied with avoiding Miyamoto-san, I forgot... that my original goal was to encounter Tendo-san by going the opposite direction of her path.

“Uwaa, what if we pass each other...”

I thought of going back and taking the main road again, but I was already too far away.

Letting out a sigh, I decided to keep walking to the last shop. Perhaps, for some reason, Tendo-san might be going home later than I thought, and she might still be at the store.

With a faint hope, I entered the familiar game store. ...I think it was also here that I was able to talk to Tendo-san for the first time.

“(Alright. I feel like... another fateful encounter will happen here!)”

If this was a love comedy, where else would an event be?

As I walked towards the inner part of the store, my heart started racing.

As I thought, my expectations were splendidly—

“(...Yea—)”

crushed. There was no blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl in here.

This is my life—mediocre. Things like a love comedy template wouldn't apply to me. Speaking of which, a flag which would be more appropriate is—
“Shopkeeper, please!”

“(He came!)”

Upon hearing that distinctive voice once again, I immediately hid myself behind the shelves.

He—Miyamoto-san entered the store, looked around the store to see if I was there, then headed to the cash register.

“(I-I was saved because I know the layout so well...”

Trying to escape to an area well out of his sight, I moved silently through the shelves. ...I imagined I was a snake for a second, but I immediately thought “What am I even doing...” and became depressed. ...I didn’t come here so I could pretend to be a snake.

“Do you have any copies of Cry... ...Crystal Cradle 3, shopkeeper!?”

“I’m just a part-time worker...”

I stealthily made my way to the exit as I watched him finally get the name right. ...I already made sure that this store didn’t have a copy of Kurikure 3. By experience, I know that if the package isn’t in the storefront, it’s not in inventory either.

In fact, as I expected, the clerk immediately apologized.

“We sold out of stock for Crystal Cradle 3 yesterday... the next shipment is still unknown.”

“Dammit...! Can nothing else be done...”

Miyamoto-san collapsed in defeat in front of the register. ...What is this, a solo performance? The clerk was really flustered in front of the collapsed Miyamoto-san.

“(Alright, time to leave...)”

While Miyamoto-san was on the ground, I once again made my way to the exit. ...I wasn’t able to meet Tendo-san, but it can’t be helped. Since none of the stores had a copy anyway, Tendo-san probably wasn’t able to buy it.

After all...

“(I can just normally give it to her during break time tomorrow!”

Well, she might be able to buy it from an online auction. However, it's likely that she'll face the same problems as today.

Also, after spending all of today looking for the game, if I'm able to give my copy to her... then she'll definitely be grateful, and she might look at me in a better light!

"(It's a bit misleading, but... Tendo-san will be happy too!)

I felt a strange sense of accomplishment as I stealthily made my way past Miyamoto-san. Paying careful attention to the register, I walked out of the store with light steps— "Ah. Amano-kun!"

"...Huh?"

Hearing someone's voice from the entrance, my body tensed up in surprise.

"M-misumi-kun!? W-why are you here..."

"Well, the club ended early today, so I also thought to look for a copy of Kurikure 3."

"O-oh, I see..."

I was sweating buckets. Why... would Misumi-kun be here... I felt a gaze on my back from the register...

But, without knowing the situation, Misumi-kun set off a landmine.

"Oh right, Amano-kun, were you able to give your copy of Kurikure 3 to her?"

"(Misumi-kuuuuuuuunnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!)"

I can't help but feel hatred towards that big smile! Even though he didn't have any bad intentions and didn't know what was happening... sorry, Misumi-kun! I want to hit you really badly!

I didn't even have time to punch him, though, since I felt a presence approaching me from the back.

Turning around in surprise, there was... not Misumi-kun, but rather, the

broadly grinning Miyamoto-san.

“Hey hey, we meet again, boy!”

“Kyaaaaaaaaaa!”

I involuntary screamed, as if I saw a face from one of Umez Kao’s works.

Still unable to read the mood, Misumi-kun tilted his head in curiosity.

Miyamoto-san kept smiling with a grin.^[4]

Miyamoto stood in front of me, and I broke out in a cold sweat at the situation... in an instant, he abruptly kneeled on the ground and prostrated himself.

“Please! I can pay however much you want, but please give me the game!”

“No!”

I refused instantly. T-this is too valuable. It’ll open up a bridge between me and Tendo-san. It’s not something that can be solved with money.

However, Miyamoto-san kept begging.

“Then what do you want!? My signature!? Do you want my signature!?”

“I don’t want it!”

“What do you mean, you don’t want it! Isn’t that rude to an actor!?”

“I’m sorry!”

I apologized out of habit from the great pressure. I quickly regained my wits.

“No, that’s not it! It’s not that I don’t want your signature, but I cannot give up this game!”

“Then what will make you agree to negotiate!?”

“Nothing can be exchanged!”

“Even if I offered my life!?”

“There’s way too many things wrong with that!”

“Fine. I’m extremely reluctant, but... I’ll go on a date with you once!”

“I’m the one that’s reluctant! It’s on the same level as offering your life!!”

“My signature, life, a date... boy, do you even have anything you want!?”

“I’m normal! Money was the best option out of all of those!”

“Alright, money it is! How about 1500 yen!?”

“That’s not what I’m saying! Also, way too cheap! Even the listed price is higher!”

“...You have a weird sense of values, boy.”

“I have a normal sense of values though!”

Misumi-kun was flustered, not knowing what to do, while the clerk was looking at us while grumbling “Please stop doing weird things in front of the store...”

We kept glaring at each other in silence for a while... He was the first to break the silence.

Suddenly getting up, he dusted off his legs, and looked at me with a wry smile.

“Sorry, boy. I showed you something disgraceful.”

“Huh? No, it’s fine...”

I blinked in confusion.

Miyamoto-san scratched his head and continued on.

“Having helped me a lot today, even if we were strangers, a nice boy like you must have a reason as to why you can’t give me the game. ...Sorry, please forgive me.”

“Eh... uh, no... that’s... I’m also sorry too.”

Feeling bad that I tried to stealthily run away from meeting Miyamoto-san, I hung my head in shame. He cheerfully smiled and patted my shoulder.

“What is there for you to apologize for? I was just being selfish.”

“Well... that’s true, but...”

“No, really, you don’t have to worry. In the first place, it wasn’t like I really wanted that game. I was being stubborn.”

“H-ha... If you say so...”

“Yea. ...Sorry, got a phone call.”

Miyamoto-san took out his smartphone from his shirt pocket. Misumi-kun and I exchanged looks, and then I said, “W-well then, I’ll leave now...”

Misumi-kun, who didn’t know anything to the very end, also awkwardly said bye. Miyamoto-san waved back with a smile.

“Hi, it’s me...”

After seeing that he started talking on the phone, Misumi-kun decided to take a look in the store, and we separated. Finally, time to leave—

“Hey, Kaori. Sorry. The game’s sold out everywhere. Yea. ...There’s other games to play together at home. Oh, right, also tell my daughter—”

...

I stopped in the middle of the doorway.

*

“You actually gave it to some random man on the street!?”

Uehara-kun shouted at me in the classroom the next morning. Attracting the attention of the people out in the hallway, I curled up in my seat.

“...Sorry.”

“If things could be solved with a ‘sorry’, there would be no need for a love comedy police!”

“Where is this love comedy police in the first place?”

“That’s me! I’m the chief of police! And I sentence you to life in prison!”

“That’s not what policemen do...”

“Be quiet, you attempted love comedy suicide!”

“What is this new charge!?”

“Why do you always, always break your own flags with Tendo! You’d do

better even if you ran into each other by chance!"

"I have no words to say. However, um, I would like to call for my lawyer, Misumi-kun..."

"Lawyers aren't allowed in the interrogation room!"

"This love comedy police is very corrupt."

"That's because this is an incident at hand! This is just depressing!"

"This system brings happiness to no one, this love comedy police."

"Shut up! If we're able to control someone like you, we'll be happy!"

"What a bad organization. Have I even committed that severe of a crime?"

"...Huh?"

"I'm sorry. I'll go to my cell."

Because Uehara-kun had a really angry look on his face, I hung my head in shame. He kept looking at me for a while, and then sighed in resignation.

"...It's fine already. I know you're the kind of person to do that."

"Wah, those words are really like what a friend would say!"

"Shut up, I'll actually hit you."

"Wah, those words are really like what a bully would say... ...Sorry."

"...Hah."

Uehara-kun sighed once again, then continued talking.

"Well, it was your game in the first place. You can do whatever you want with it. But even so, you... gave it to some man that you just met for free. Did you not have the spirit to say that you won't give up your game for any amount of money?"

"Huh? Oh, well, that spirit hasn't changed."

"Hah?"

Uehara-kun tilted his neck, not understanding.

I then told him the whole story.

“Of course, I wouldn’t give up the game for any amount of money. But if someone can be happy, then I would gladly hand it over.”

“...What the hell, are you Buddha? Or are you some god of games?”

I returned a bitter smile to the shocked Uehara-kun.

“I’m not trying to say that at all. Hmm... do you not understand? I’m happy if people can have fun with the games they play.”

“...Is it fine for that man to get it over Tendo?”

“Well, I want Tendo-san to be have fun too. But I think that Tendo-san will probably get her hands on the game eventually. But, in this case, if I didn’t give it to Miyamoto-san, he probably would’ve settled for a different game...”

“You couldn’t let him settle for a different game, huh. ...You’re really stupid, aren’t you?”

“...Sorry.”

This time around, even I was surprised. Giving a game to a stranger might be a philanthropic activity, but I still have a bad taste in my mouth. ...But... but still...

I know more than anyone else what it means to have fun with your family while playing games.

Uehara-kun laughed and comforted me.

“...Well, isn’t it fine already?”

“Uehara-kun...”

My eyes teared up. Feeling embarrassed, Uehara-kun averted his eyes and changed the subject.

“Well? How are you going to make up for your lost chances now?”

Well, to that question, I... with a smile, answered as I normally would.

“I’ll do that by playing fun games, of course!”

Epilogue

Miyamoto Satoshi, who was returning home, was thinking about the contents of the bag with a smile on his face as he walked in the door.

It's the game his daughter had wanted for a while now. Furthermore, Miyamoto also wanted the game so he could play with the family. He would've paid as much money as he could for it.

Lately, my job has been busy, so I haven't been able to travel or do much. I was able to get the game at just the right time. Also, my daughter is a child who takes action really quickly, so as soon as she finds a game, I wouldn't be able to talk to her, but... because of that boy, I was able to find it quickly. With this, I can communicate with her properly. [5]

Feeling excited, Miyamoto rang the intercom.

The nameplate of the house suddenly entered Miyamoto's vision—it had the characters "Tendo" on it. He laughed to himself as he realized that he got used to using his stage name.

The door opened, and his wife, Tendo Kaori, opened the door with a smile.

Closing her eyes, she told him that their daughter had already come home in disappointment, having not been able to find the game.

Miyamoto returned a smile, walked into the hallway, and...

called out the name of his beloved daughter in a loud voice.
"I'm back! Hey, Karen, come here for a sec—!"

Notes and References

1. [↑] Bocchi is short for hitori bocchi, which means “solitary”.
2. [↑] I’m not sure if this game is a reference to anything. Please tell me if it is.
3. [↑] In Japanese, this is pronounced similarly. I couldn’t find a way to make “binge drinking” rhyme with “cradle”.
4. [↑] Umezawa Kazuo is a horror manga author.
5. [↑] PoV is weird in this section. It’s generally in 3rd person, but it was in the PoV of Miyamoto for this paragraph.

Chapter 2

The Gamer's Hobby Club and the Two Person Play

“Why are you being so stubborn, Chiaki!? ‘Moe’ is a universal quality that makes every work complete!”

“Oho, complete, is it? Then one question, Keita. Are you claiming that you need ‘moe’ even for a war movie?”

“Like I said—! Why are your ideas so extreme!?”

“Is being extreme that bad~? Aren’t personal opinions supposed to be biased~? fun~, this is why a lonely boy who believes that staying neutral is better than giving constructive comments is...”

“I don’t want to be like a boring adult, but I guess it’s better than creators who don’t care like you.”

“Shut up, chibi.”

“How uncu^te, you ‘seaweed girl’.”

After school, sitting across each other at a desk, a boy and a girl glared at each other.

“You guys, get along— ...Hah...”

Sitting in between the two, I tried to stop their fighting while yawning loudly. Naturally, though, their fight wasn’t something that could be solved so simply. Ignoring me completely, they resumed their “moe” debate, leaving me alone... finally, I came to a conclusion.

“(This Hobby Club is so boringggggggggg!)”

It’s already been a month since the Gamer’s Hobby Club was created. Though

irregularly, the club met about once or twice a week, and this is already the tenth meeting, but...

To be frank, after the eighth time, I don't know how they can continue to fight about the same thing over and over again. Amano and Hoshinomori somehow always fight every single time they meet. Of course, they leave me out every single time, and it gets boring pretty fast.

Also, this fight is... it's certainly a fight, but from my point of view, it makes my heart strangely itch from time to time...

"Oh, by the way."

Taking a pause from advocating his "moe", Amano loosened his necktie and let out a sigh before continuing to talk.

"Chiaki, how far have you gotten in Kurikure 3?"

Taking a sip of her coffee-flavored soy milk, Hoshinomori replied cheerfully, unlike the menacing look she had on her face earlier.

"Fufu~n. Listen carefully, Keita. I... have finally reached the great capital city, Elst!"

"Oh, me too."

"Eh!? Ugu... and I thought I was ahead of you...!"

"No, that's what I should be saying. Yesterday, my RNG was pretty good, so I got a decent amount of progress done."

"S-same here. It was the first time I showed off in years, too...!"

They both glared at each other while grinding their teeth in irritation. then a few seconds of silence passed.

"... The.. the boss of Thirst Valley was good..."

Amano muttered as he averted his eyes.

"... Well... that... the setup and the background music were good, it was difficult but not unreasonable, and the boss' behavioral pattern was good as well, so certainly, it was a good boss..."

Hoshinomori also averted her gaze and timidly replied.

The two of them stole glances at each other, but never faced each other directly. Continuing the conversation, they kept fidgeting.

“A-and then the balance of the dungeons are as good as they can possibly be. Even though skills improve and better weapons drop at a reasonable pace, the battles don’t become tiring and the game’s difficulty is perfectly adjusted!”

“Yeah, yeah! It really lived up to expectations! Keita, you have a good eye for detail! That’s exactly right! Sadly, I don’t have anyone to talk about the game like that with. On the internet, the topic has shifted to speedrunning since they have already cleared the game, leaving behind the slow gamers like us....”

“Yes! That’s right! I only have a short time to play games each day, and even then, I’m not very good at it and also have other games to play, so I don’t have anyone else to talk to who’s on the same part of the game as I am. That’s why I only talk to my brother about the game, wait....”

“I know what you mean! I also only talk about the game with my sister who has about the same game progress! Well, it’s not like I have much friends in the first place...”

“Yea... There aren’t any friends who are progressing at the same rate we do...”

“Because of that, I’ve been trying to pass you in the game lately...”

“Yea, me too...”

They began to fidget and glanced at each other once again. And then...

“But, I hate the heroine Lisa because she’s so pushy.”

“Hah!? That’s being pushy? Hmph, this is why a loser girl who immediately labels a 2D heroine as “unrealistic” is...”

“Hah!? Disgusting! There isn’t any boy out there who would start defending a heroine character like her—”

Suddenly, their gentle conversation took a turn and they started fighting for a second round. Even though they were averting their eyes from each other a second ago, they were now glaring at each other and quarrelling.

While I watched over two warmly... my mind screamed inside.

“(Go marry already and do this at homeeeeeeeeeeee!)”

Do you understand? This fight is a fight, but... it looks like a lover's quarrel. I can't stand to watch this; my heart's beating too loudly.

“(Even though looking over Amano's love comedy is like a hobby...! Somehow... when I watch them talk, it's way too sweet!)”

Far from keeping my distance, I'm surprised because I insist that I'm not friends with them. What the hell? What have I been doing here after school these days?

Also, because there's the difficult situation with my girlfriend, it's even more difficult. I feel like I would be forgiven right now if I got up and hit Amano. I think the jury would declare, “Even though it was definitely an outburst of anger, taking the circumstances into consideration, the defendant is not guilty.”

While I was going through various emotions, the two kept fighting.

“The scene where Lisa gets jealous of Serena is the most heart-pounding scene!”

“Ah, that event is really disgusting. It always feels like a love comedy as well, but especially, why is the heroine, who isn't even going out with the protagonist, getting mad because he's with other girls? I don't get it. She doesn't have the right to get mad.”

“No, she definitely has the right! Then Chiaki, if you saw a boy you were interested in walking with a cute girl, what would you think!?”

“Eh, I-I... um...”

Hoshinomori sent a fleeting glance towards me. ...Honestly, I've known that she's been emotionally attached to me for a while now, but because of her seemingly natural middle-aged couple act with Amano, I just can't take her good will seriously. It's probably similar to how Amano is emotionally attached to me. It's like imprinting in chicks; she was probably overjoyed by the fact that she was able to make a new friend.

She sent me a flustered look as our eyes met. After a few moments of contemplation, she answered Amano with a wry smile.

"I... if I saw the boy I liked having fun with a girl, I think I would be sad for a little while... but, eventually, I would only think 'Good for them'... At least, I wouldn't get mad. Yeah."

"..."

Watching her reply so bashfully, both Amano and I stopped breathing in surprise and sunk into silence... As she hung her head in embarrassment, I elbowed Amano lightly and whispered into his ear.

"(H-hey, Amano! Don't you feel anything when you see Hoshinomori like this?)"

"(What!? N-no, that's what I should be saying, Uehara-kun!)"

"(Hah!? Why would you be saying that!? That doesn't make any sense! No, more importantly, Amano. You just saw that right now. Don't you... feel like she's surprisingly a good girl?)"

"(I-is that so? That's, well... that's... honestly, I feel like I just lost that argument... N-next time, I won't lose!)"

"(No, no, that's not what I'm saying! Win or lose doesn't matter! Don't you feel inside your heart that you want to protect a cute girl like her!?)"

"(...fu~n, I see... so that's what you were thinking, Uehara-kun...)"

"(Why are you looking at me with those eyes as if you were looking a pile of trash!? A-anyway, I was just saying how I think Hoshinomori's a good girl...)"

"(I-I don't want to hear that from Uehara-kun's mouth! You're the worst!)"

"(Why are you suddenly talking like a girl!?)"

"(No, I guess you could say that I'm speaking for a certain person...)"

"(Don't say things that don't make sense. You... just go compromise with Hoshinomori. You understand, right? She's really a good person.)"

"(Guh...)"

Amano groaned, as if someone poked a bruise. He hung his head just like Hoshinomori and stayed silent for a short while... Showing some kind of

renewed determination, he sat up in his chair.

“Ch-chiaki!”

“Huh? What?”



Hoshinomori tilted her head in curiosity while looking at Amano, whose back muscles were tensed. The two of them looked at each other for a while... Amano's face tightened up, and he talked as he looked straight at Hoshinomori's eyes.

"I-I think that someone like Chiaki has a lot of 'moe'!"

He said it. He really said it. He said it even more directly than I thought he would. A lonely boy who grew up without having learned how to communicate with the other gender is really scary.

Quickly, I looked at Hoshinomori's reaction. Her cheeks were tinged pink—not. Rather, her head was steaming in anger!

"D-d-don't make a fool out of me, Keita!"

Hoshinomori slammed her hand against the table and stood up. Ignoring the both of us, who were completely dumbfounded, she continued to talk with teary eyes.

"S-saying that I have 'moe' attributes... Just the thought of it makes me scared!"

"What!?"

Both Amano and I were dumbfounded. No... how much does she hate 'moe' that she goes as far as to reject a compliment...

Trembling, she wrapped her arms around herself. ...Even though I'm not Amano, I feel like it can't be helped that someone with a small, animal-like form like her would be called "moe".

"E-especially since Keita called me 'moe'... I-I only feel disgusted!"

"(Wah~, how moe~)"

I looked at the tsundere girl with practically saint-like eyes. However, receiving her words directly, Amano groaned and said, "Ugu, certainly, I must be disgusting!". Ah... come to think of it, this guy really has no confidence in himself.

I looked at Hoshinomori once again. ...Like a girl would be, it looked like she was really angry. I've only been a third party, but from what I can tell, the

“moe” that Hoshinomori hates seems to refer to the heroine’s strong personality. From the outside, the heroine seems to always take the initiative, and since she sees the character as fundamentally flawed, she seems to see the character in a bad light.

“(In other words, I guess it means that saying that Hoshinomori has an aspect of ‘moe’ to her will end with a shallow understanding.)”

Well, that’s certainly regrettably sad... wait, what? No, wait a second.

“(She... just then, didn’t she say that ‘especially’ ‘Amano’ was the bad part...)”

While I was pondering over that, this time it was Amano that hit the desk with his hand and stood up.

“I-I’m truly sorry that you were disgusted by my words. B-but...”

Looking at her with a fierce glare, he spoke with a strong voice.

“When I say that you have ‘moe’, I’m only saying the highest words of praise that I can!”

...Huh? N-no, isn’t, isn’t that a really bold thing to say—

“Shut up, shut up! I’m not happy to receive your praise! No matter how you use it, I hate ‘moe’!”

“Hah!? Even until now, are you going to be so childish!?”

“Who’s the child here!? I don’t think the chibi who’s shouting ‘moe’ is the adult here!”

“It’s still better than you, ‘seaweed girl’!”

“Huh!?”

“Um... h-hey...”

Even though I raised my hand and tried to speak up, the two of them continued to fight without any signs of stopping. After watching over them for short while again... I let out a sigh once again.

“(The girl who wants him to properly look at her, and a boy who says that he thinks she’s cute from the bottom of his heart. If this isn’t mutual love, I don’t know what is...)”

At least, these two had a good relationship that you could call “friendship”.

“...Good grief.”

With a sigh, I observed them argue over moe once again.

Well... actually, even including all these arguments, these two make a good pair. In other words, my actions were nothing but pointless meddling.

“That’s why Chiaki is—”

“Keita, Keita, that’s strange—”

The ever-constant situation of the Hobby Club. The rays of the sun entered the classroom gently as it set.

In the end, I failed to improve their antagonistic relationship, and continued to watch them for a bit.

A gentle, adult-like smile appeared on my face.

Calmly, I looked out the window... I quietly thought over what happened today.

The harsh rays of the sun pierced my eyes as I remembered how I spent the day completely alone, having been left out of the discussion the whole time.

1. ‘Seaweed girl’ refers to her hairstyle.

Chapter 3

Aguri and the Communication Mishap

Note: Aguri refers to herself in the third person.

A certain day of a certain month. Today, Aguri finished the daily love report (it's painful every time) at the family restaurant with Amano-chi and played around with the phone to kill some time before Aguri finished her drink.

“(As usual, Tasuku rarely contacts me...)”

Feeling somewhat hurt by the truth today once again, Aguri turned off her phone.

Looking up, Aguri saw Amano-chi trying really hard to do something on his smartphone that he was holding in landscape mode.

Aguri leaned against the table, rested her cheek on her hand, and gazed at him with a slightly amazed look.

“...Amano-chi, you really like your, uh, ‘beep boops’, huh.”

“‘Beep boop’? Not even old ladies say that anymore to refer to games, you know.”

Amano-chi didn’t look away from the screen at all while shooting back a tsukkomi. ...Is being able to respond to Aguri without looking up from his game evolution or de-evolution...?

The ice cubes in the cup clinked against one another as Aguri stirred her soda with her straw.

“No, compared to other people playing around on apps, Amano-chi gives off more of a ‘gamer’ feeling... I guess you could say that it no longer looks like a smartphone.”

“Are you saying it looks like I’m playing on a Game & Watch?”

"Huh? What? Watch? Are you talking about that thing that makes youkai appear?"^[1]

"No, it's different. It's an old portable gaming console. Do you not know about it? It's about the size of a smartphone with a monochrome display."

Amano-chi finally looked up from his phone and explained it thoroughly to Aguri. ...But no matter how much you tell Aguri, you don't know what you don't know.

"Rather, Amano-chi, you're the same age as Aguri, so I doubt that you know about old games."

"Huh? Why... it's the same as simple addition and subtraction. Isn't it just common knowledge?"

"Definitely not!"

Aguri's doesn't know anything about games at all, but Aguri definitely thinks that Game & Watch isn't common knowledge as Amano-chi thinks it is!

At this point, Aguri would usually shift the topic toward Amano-chi's interest in games, but this time, he unexpectedly launched a counterattack.

"But, Uehara-kun always follows along whenever I talk about games."

"Ugu!?"

Aguri faltered from the jab.

...Certainly, it might not be common knowledge, but since Tasu has an interest in these kind of things, is Aguri unable to understand him at all? Because of that, that girl... Hoshinomori Chiaki is now a threat in various ways.

Suddenly feeling attacked by a wave of anxiety, Aguri's gaze wandered around the family restaurant... Trying to look composed, I shifted the conversation towards games once again.

"What... what kind of games does Tasu play these days, I wonder..."

It was clear that Aguri's question was of a lower priority as Amano-chi looked back down at his game and responded.

"It looks like he's starting to play FPS games lately."

“F... F... P... S?”

W-what language is this? Is this related to kaki pii in some way? No? No, right?^[2]

Not noticing that Aguri was utterly confused, this game otaku boy continued to talk.

“An exhilarating, skill-dependent game where you shoot your opponents like an FPS certainly suits Uehara-kun~.”

“Huh? Y-yea, that’s right. I-it fits Tasu perfectly. Ef... oh! FPS!”

Noticing that “F P S” meant the acronym “FPS”, Aguri pointlessly exclaimed in realization.

Suddenly, Amano-chi looked up at Aguri in excitement, but didn’t try to ask anything and looked back down at his game.

“(Guh... what the hell, Aguri doesn’t want to learn what kind of game an FPS is and what it stands for from an otaku boy who keeps saying ‘FPS’ over and over again!)”

Whenever Aguri talks about fashion, Amano-chi would always go “Décoll... été?” with a blank face, but it feels like this power relationship was just flipped.

Moving past that topic, Aguri started thinking to wonder what this “FPS” that her boyfriend like was.

“(He said that it was an exhilarating, skill-dependent game where you shoot your opponents... right? Shoot... in other words... the ‘S’ stands for shooting, right!? And then, ‘FPS’ would mean...)”

While trying to reason out the answer, Aguri asked Amano-chi indirectly to check her answers.

“A-amano-chi, do you also like it? That game...”

“What? What game are you talking about?”

Not expecting to be continuing the conversation from before, Amano-chi looked up and tilted his head.

Believing that “This is it!”, Aguri tried to check her answer.

“A ‘Friend’s Parents Shooting’ game.”

“A game where you shoot your friend’s parents!? I-I don’t like that kind of game!”

“Is that so? Then you don’t have the same tastes Tasu does then, Amano-chi.”

“Uehara-kun likes that kind of game!? Honestly, that’s just scary!”

H-huh, that’s strange. Somehow, it doesn’t look like “FPS” is a game where you shoot your friend’s parents.

But now it’s hard to ask for the correct answer. First of all, Aguri will stick with her interpretation for the time being, but Amano-chi was grumbling to himself for some reason.

“But, to think that Uehara-kun likes those kind of hardcore games... Before, he said that ‘Lately, I’ve lost interest in MO games (a multiplayer co-op game like Monster Counter)’, but...”

At those words, Aguri jumped up in surprise.

“Eh, he has... has an interest in M-type boys?!?”

“Huh? Ah, yea, well, Uehara-kun has many friends and gets invited a lot too.”

“Really!? I-is that, w-why, Tasu gets along with Amano-chi so well these days?”

To Aguri, who was asking in a panicked voice... Amano-chi shyly smiled for some reason, said “No way,” and waved his hand in denial.

“Uehara-kun and I, haven’t done it yet, you know?”

“What do you mean by yet, yet! Why are you making such an outrageous statement so easily, Amano-chi!?”

Aguri reflexively hit the table and stood up.

“Huh? What are you so excited about? Aguri-san.”

“A... Aguri’s not excited! Aguri doesn’t have those kind of hobbies!”

“H-hah, that is true. Aguri-san doesn’t really play...”

“P-pla— Hey, Amano-chi! Don’t think of Aguri as a easy woman! Aguri means, Aguri is really shocked! Aguri never thought that Amano-chi was that much of a player!”

“What? Oh, my house is a pretty easy-going environment, so I play with strangers, going “bang, bang”. On the internet!”

“You play around with people you just randomly meet online!? That’s extreme! You’ve reached a new low, Amano-chi!”^[3]

“Ehehe, well, honestly, it’s at a level where it can’t be helped that I’m so bad...”

“Why are you proud of that!? D-don’t pull in my Tasu like that!”

“I can’t agree to that no matter how much Aguri-san asks. After all, the person himself wants to, so...”

“Don’t say that, m-my boyfriend, wants to do it!”

At last, Aguri shouted as her faced flushed red.

The surrounding customers, startled at the outburst, faced in our direction... Eventually, Amano-chi looked like he realized something, and panicked.

“Ah, u-uh, umm, I don’t know when, but didn’t we just have a horrible misunderstanding!?”

“Huh? A misunderstanding...”

Aguri finally calmed down, and deliberately talked it over with Amano-chi.

And then—several minutes later.

“Oh my.”

There were the figures of two people having a friendly conversation while putting their hands on their chests, sighing in relief.

Thinking about the absurd misunderstanding we had, both of us laughed
“Seriously, we’re idiots for not noticing that misunderstanding earlier.”

“Really, really! Ahaha, ah, that’s funny! That’s really funny!”

“Yea, it is! It’s practically miraculous how much we misunderstand each other! But even then...”

“Yea, I don’t know if it was a fairy or God, but it was a bit excessive of a prank. But...”

The two of us, while smiling, then said the same words at the same time.

“Aguri (we) aren’t that thickheaded to not have noticed our misunderstanding!”

We both praised each other’s perceptiveness while smiling.

And so, today once again, the meeting... without having really helped either of us, ended on a calm and positive note.

Notes and References

1. [↑] Reference to Youkai Watch
2. [↑] Rice crackers with peanuts
3. [↑] There's another misunderstanding here about the "bang, bang!" that Amano says, but I found it difficult to make the wordplay come across in English.

Chapter 4

Extra: Misumi Eiichi and the Infuriating Battle

I can't empathize with a mediocre main character who loves an uneventful everyday life.

The reason is, I've never experienced putting myself in that "ordinary everyday life".

Three years ago, I found myself playing puzzle games in an arcade.

...Before that, I have no memory of anything.

I wasn't holding any identification, wallet, or a phone; instead, there was a small handgun haphazardly jammed into the inner pocket of my jacket.

...For as long as I can remember, my life was the exact opposite of "ordinary".

When I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror, both my facial features and my body looked like that of a middle schooler's, but I didn't know my exact age. The uniform I was wearing looked more like a military uniform than a school uniform, and on my armband, the letters "E.G.G." were written in the silhouette of a griffon. It sounded like some name of an organization.

Aimlessly wandering the town without a particular destination, I encountered a girl confronted by men in black suits pretending to help in a back-alley. Going with the flow of things, I helped her out. Once the incident was over, the girl, Riki, finally arrived at her destination—it was her parent's home, the mansion of the Misumi family.

After being frank with my circumstances and with a stroke of good luck, the

head of the Misumi family, possessed by a strong sense of duty, brought me into the family as an adopted child, and so I became the person I am today — “Misumi Eiichi”.

And so I was given food, clothing, and shelter, but even then, my life wasn’t by any means calm.

A mysterious organization that was aiming for my step-sister would often contact me, glimpses of a past relationship between me and that organization would occasionally appear, the family’s pharmaceutical company seemed to have a few secrets, my sister would always get mad whenever I talked to a girl from school, and I would often be attacked by people who wore the same uniform I was wearing when I first woke up...

And most recently, the most beautiful girl from Otobuki High School, Tendo Karen-san, called out to me and invited me to the Gamers Club for some reason (my sister had a sullen expression).

Well, at any rate, in the life of Misumi Eiichi, there was no such thing as an “ordinary, boring day”.

As a result, since I don’t know what merit being “ordinary” has in the first place, whenever I read a manga or a novel depicting a protagonist that treats it as an important thing, I don’t understand. Because my everyday life has always been in “a state of perpetual action”, whenever a work depicts an “ordinary life”, I can only think of it as a boring, flat, and a useless depiction.

So I, starting now, will tell a story.

A story using the typical, overused light novel setting, though I feel very regretful doing so.

At the end of the day,

Starting from the time when the special main character who wished for

something extraordinary is called out by the beautiful girl, this is an extraordinary tale that makes me empathize to a remarkable extent—

—This is a story about a game.

*

“Is it... the local TVGT preliminaries?”

“Yea!”

In the clubroom of the Gamers Club, the beautiful as ever president Tendo Karen-san, confidently pushed forward a proposal.

Kase-senpai was playing an FPS, and Oiso-senpai was playing a fighting game quietly, so the only two first-years in the room were idling. In the scattered setting of the clubroom, Tendo-san faced towards me and handed me a flyer. While I quickly scanned through the flyer, Tendo-san kept enthusiastically rambling on and on.

“Total Video Game Tournament, or TVGT for short. It’s next Saturday, so it’s a bit sudden, but I wanted to invite you to participate in this tournament. Of course, I will too.”

“Yes, that’s no problem, but...”

While talking, I sent a fleeting glance towards the senpais. Even though we were talking about game tournament, they look strangely uninterested. Tendo-san had a bitter smile.

“Those two... well, I mean, other than the two of us, no one else will go.”

“Eh, is that the case? Why?”

“I’m sure you know by looking at the flyer, but this tournament’s biggest feature is being a ‘comprehensive game tournament’... in other words, you compete in all genres of games. So, a game with some competitive aspect will be randomly selected right before the next round.”

“Heh~, that sounds somewhat like a festival; it looks fun.”

“Right? I also think that way and go every year, but look at these other club

members..."

"Ah... I see."

Understanding how Tendo-san feels, I nodded my head. Other than Tendo-san and I, the other members of the Gamers Club were people who are fundamentally "specialized". They're people who have an interest in and are good at specific games like FPS or fighting games.

Naturally, they don't have a reason to participate in the "comprehensive game tournament. ...Now that I think about it, that might be why Tendo-san wanted people like Amano and I who haven't "matured as gamers".

After looking over the flyer and noting the key points briefly, I turned to Tendo-san with a smile.

"Alright. Then, let me accept your kind offer, and let's participate together. Well, I'm a beginner, so I'll probably be eliminated pretty early on anyway..."

At my reply, Tendo-san's golden hair fluttered in the air as she smiled.

"OK, good! You can sign up here. Let's both do our best."

"Yea. Please take care of me."

After finishing her explanation, Tendo-san went back to her seat. I looked over the flyer once again.

"(A tournament, huh. This kind of event sounds more exciting than our usual club activities. ...As I thought, I still don't know what it means to have an 'ordinary life'.)"

Looking forward to the new experience and the fierce battle to come, my heart leapt in excitement.

—However, a disturbance that would surpass my expectations awaited me at the game tournament.

*

I think the part that makes games fun is that unlike reality, for every action, there is a proper "reply".

It's probably different for unreasonably bad video games or games based on chance, but fundamentally, most games are based on predetermined rules. If the player presses a button, the character will respond, if your HP goes down to zero, it's game over, and if you defeat the last boss, the game ends.

This “rule-bound world” felt very comfortable to me.

At the very least, an outrageous event like

<After chasing down and cornering the criminals that abducted your step-sister, but, with no context whatsoever, after the intervention of a silver-haired miko, the criminals successfully escape>

that happens in real life is less believable than any event that occurs in a high quality game.

In that kind of world, it's completely possible to have “victory” or “defeat” without killing or injuring anyone... it's really wonderful.

“...Today’s finally the tournament, huh.”

Saturday morning. After finishing my breakfast with the family as always, I was sitting in the dining room, sipping coffee, while thinking about games. — When I realized, though, my sister, Riki, was still in the dining room, although she usually finishes her breakfast quickly and leaves the room.

Sitting across from me, she looked at me sullenly while resting her cheek in her hands. She’s a dainty girl that looks like a really delicate doll.

I started the conversation with a harmless and inoffensive smile.

“What’s wrong? You look somewhat unhappy today.”

“...Not really~. Rumors have been reaching my all girl’s school that Eiichi has plans on his day off with a popular, beautiful woman known as Tendo Karen, but that has absolutely nothing to do with me, so...”

Rika talked with a sullen look on her face. ...As the ojou-sama of a respectable family, even though she usually acts elegantly, she can be childish from time to time when she’s talking to me. ...Honestly, it’s pretty embarrassing, but I guess it means that she’s opening up her heart to me... well, I am a little happy.

When I chuckled unintentionally, Riki pouted and stuck out her lips.

“A-are you that excited about going out with Tendo-san?”

“Huh? Ah, well, I guess. Actually, I’m really looking forward to today.”

Anyway, ever since joining the club, I, as a beginner, found my hands full learning about all sorts of games, so I never had the chance to ever play against anyone. Because of that, I felt even more excited for today.

“(Actually, it’s because that game was really fun. When Tendo-san, Kase-senpai, Oiso-senpai, and Amano all played together...)”

Thinking back on those fun times, I unintentionally smiled. I don’t know what she was thinking while she was looking at me, but Rika, in a really bad mood, hit the table and stood up.

“Thank you for the meal!”

“Oh, Riki, if you’re also going out, make sure to be careful of the usual organization—”

“Tch, i-it has nothing to do with Eiichi! Well then, have a good day!”

“Ah, o-ok. You too, Riki, have a good—”

Before I could finish, Riki quickly walked out of the dining room. ...Hmm, I wonder. By any chance, did she want me to hold her bags today? What a natural ojou-sama. Well, I’m sure she’ll cheer up later.

“...Alright!”

Drinking the last of my coffee, I pumped myself up and walked out of the house.

The local TVGT preliminaries were being hosted at the biggest game center in the area.

After meeting Tendo-san, we both registered for the competition and got nameplates with the registered name and number. Once that was finished, we sat against the wall together and passed time until our first event. ...However...

“...Even now, Tendo-san, when you’re going out... or rather, when you’re outside, you attract a lot of attention.”

Ever since we met up, I have been unintentionally wincing since we were attracting everyone's attention.

However, Tendo-san seemed to be used to it, and looked confident instead.

"Is that so? Misumi-kun, if you feel mindful of it, I don't mind if we separate."

"Ah, no, I'm normally used to the attention, but..."

In the last three years, I got involved in quite a few troubles downtown, so I'm pretty resistant to attention. ...But in this case, Tendo-san stands out too much.

While looking at the crowd with a strange admiration, Tendo-san suddenly laughed as if she saw something really funny.

"Huh? What's up?"

"Eh? Ah, no, it's nothing. When we were talking about being used to attention, I thought of Amano-kun."

"Ah, he looks like the type that would be bad with these kind of things."

While we were talking back and forth about a common friend, Tendo-san suddenly started talking enthusiastically for some reason.

"Yea, that's right! Whenever I get close to him, his face immediately turns red. I guess he feels somewhat embarrassed. ...Fufu."

"?"

I blinked my eyes in confusion as I looked at Tendo-san, who was laughing really hard in enjoyment.

"(H-how strange, for her to laugh like this. ...She's usually pretty gentle, so I didn't think she had this kind of side to her...)"

I've never seen this Tendo-san at the Gamers Club. ...Personally, I didn't think our conversation about Amano-kun was that funny... Rather, I only think that Amano-kun is pretty pitiful, but...

I couldn't bring myself to laugh about Amano-kun with her, so I changed the subject.

"Anyway, there are a surprising amount of people at this preliminary. I mean, this area isn't even a city."

"Yea, that's right. Well, the preliminary level really feels like a festival, so the threshold is pretty low. Misumi-kun, if... if this were a serious fighting game competition, you would've hesitated to join, right?"

"Yea, probably."

"TVGT opens its doors pretty widely and lets a lot of participants join. ...But because of that, I don't think there's a 'true warrior' participating here today."

"True warrior', huh..."

Unable to imagine a 'true warrior' for games, I tilted my head in curiously. Tendo-san said, "For example... look, the one in the white hat" and looked towards the corner of the room.

"He's one of the more famous players. Look, he has that glint in his eye."

"What..."

I was lost for words. The one in the white hat looked like a university student with the characteristic freckles...

"He's went to the strip mahjong seats and sat down magnificently with his legs crossed!?"

Tendo-san talked calmly while I was still in shock.

"...Isn't it shocking? Look at that face full of confidence. He's disregarding even the families accompanying other members looks of disdain as well. You look like you haven't thought about why no one dares to enter that area in all this confusion and bustle.

"Gulp... c-certainly a warrior... a warrior that only looks at games..."

It seems like gamers follow the path of terrifying fights and battles.

While I trembled, thinking about its various meanings, the loudspeaker made a screeching sound, and then an announcement was made over the PA system.

After the standard greetings and rules, they finally announced the details of the tournament. The tournament had been divided into 3 groups, and they were starting to be displayed on several monitors throughout the building.

While I checked my number and my name, the participants of group A had

started being listed. Tendo-san talked as the numbers were being displayed.

“That’s me. My genre is... puzzle games. Then, people to watch out for... ok, it doesn’t look like there aren’t any famous players to look out for. That’s too bad.”

“Well, I’m glad that I didn’t have to meet Tendo-san in the preliminaries.”

At these preliminaries, one person from groups A, B, and C win in their respective groups... so, in the end, three people get to advance to the next stage. In other words, if I’m not in the same group as someone else, we don’t have to fight in this round.

While Tendo-san said, “Oh, that’s too bad”, in a mischievous way, the announcement for group B started.

I looked attentively as my heart beat loudly... finally, I saw my number listed.

“The genre is... t-tennis games? Uwa, it’s a genre I’ve never tried before.”

Feeling that I’d be eliminated in the first round, my mood was dampened. Tendo-san, while in a flustered state, responded.

“B-but look, your opponents are also probably bad at tennis games— ...”

“Huh? Tendo-san? What’s wrong?”

Seeing that she abruptly stopped talking, I looked at my opponent in the group.

“Number 43... uh... Echizen-san? Um, do you know the person?”

Tendo-san stayed silent to my question and looked towards the corner of the room. Is he over there...?

“...Uh... what about that strip mahjong person—wait, by any chance...”

While I was trying to guess, Tendo-san broke out in a cold sweat as she nodded...

After a few moments of silence, Tendo-san only said a few words with a grave look on her face.

“That person is, your opponent, Echizen. His playstyle involves provoking others by talking in an extremely condescending manner and he’s known as the

<Coach of Tennis>. In other words... he's one of the best players of tennis games."

"..."

While I was lost for words, Echizen, having seen my nameplate, broadly grinned.

And while sitting on the strip mahjong chair—he looked towards me, who was trembling, and with confidence dripping from his freckled face, he muttered something.

"You still have a long way to go."^[1]

*

The match consisted of a single set, first to four wins. As expected, Echizen started out massively dominant.

Game 1. I didn't know how to play and straight up lost. Echizen smiled.

"You still have lots more to work on... (Mada mada dane.)"

"H-hah, is that so... (What?)"

He said something with a smile on his face, looking like he was being cool and refreshing, but I couldn't hear him very well so I gave an ambiguous reply.

Game 2. Having learned how to play the game at last, in the end, I lost once again. Echizen said a few words.

"I will advance."

"H-hah, is that so... (It's a tournament, so you'll advance if you win...)"

This person surprisingly seems like he loves taking things at his own pace. It's as if he's a game character that only says a few fixed lines.

"(By any chance, are all gamers like this for their whole lives—)"

While I thought about it, Tendo-san was shaking her head violently in denial. ...It was my first time seeing Tendo-san with such a desperate look.

Game 3. As a result of the improvement of my own skills and the mistakes

from Echizen's overconfidence, I was able to take a point, but eventually lost.

"Won't you teach me how to play tennis?"

"...Uh... (I don't think he has the right to be speaking so sarcastically. Besides...)"

He still had the stereotypical lines, but his smug look disappeared.

And then, it was game 4.

"...Fu, fu~n, not, not bad..."

"..."

His voice shook, but kept saying fixed phrases. I glanced at him briefly, but looked back down at the game screen. ...I didn't want to lose focus.

Finally, I took a game from him; this feeling.

Changing up the flow of things, the surroundings started to become noisy, and game 5 started.

The result of the game was...

"..."

"..."

Echizen forgot his typical lines after that game, and I looked at my screen with a calm gaze, waiting for the next game... Unlike us, however, the spectators were getting amped up.

"H-hey, this guy just took two games off Echizen!"

"It was... by chance, right? It's gotta be a lie. He was a complete amateur in the first game..."

The attention had shifted away from the famous player Echizen and towards the no-name player, Misumi, who had just won two games.

Gritting his teeth, Echizen had a desperate look on his face. Game 6.

“I... I will defeat you and make it to the nationals!”

He shouted a war-cry during the match, but to no avail. I beat Echizen once again. ...This time, he was only able to take a point, and my skill had surpassed his.

“...”

Everyone watching the match was holding their breath. All the excitement had already passed, and instead, the atmosphere was a mixture of anticipation and awe as a strange mood hung over the crowd.

And the deciding game... game 7.

“...I want to become stronger. More... moooooorrrrrrrrrreeeeeeeee!”

“...”

Echizen had all but collapsed and forgot his lines and his character, but—

“...”

As if it was a throwaway game, I... uninterestedly looked down at my controller, and without losing a single point, won the match.

For a short while, only the sound of the game echoed in the room.

But right after, the silence was broken by loud cheering.

“A-amazing! What is this!? An amateur just beat Echizen at a tennis game!”

“T-that’s a lie! He’s a famous player, so I bet he got lazy and lost!”

“No, you saw what just happened, right!? He didn’t lose on purpose, he was actually beaten by a complete amateur!”

“But in the last game, didn’t he look like a pro player!?”

“A-are you saying he got better...? In.. in those seven games...?”

During the confusion of the surroundings, I calmed myself down and let out my breath.

Looking to my side, I saw an exhausted Echizen grumbling to himself, saying “Where did the pillar of Seigaku go?”. ...Even to the very end, I still don’t get what this guy is saying. Well, it’s not like I heard anything he said.

“Good job, Misumi-kun. ...You were great.”

Making my way back through the crowd, I went to go meet Tendo-san, who was smiling, but had a stiff look on her face. Wondering why, I returned a smile while saying, “You too, Tendo-san”.

“In the first round, you were winning handily unlike me, right?”

“Yea, I was, but... but you...”

Tendo-san was talking in a roundabout way. She was looking down as if she was thinking about something, and looked up after a few seconds.

“Misumi-kun, you... is this really your first time playing these tennis game?”

“? Yea, that’s right. Or should I say, it was my first time trying out the tennis game genre itself.”

“...That’s right...”

Looking at Tendo-san, who had a thin layer of sweat on her forehead, I thought I somehow said something bad, and tried to follow up in a panic.

“Ah, b-but, it was a real fight! It was completely different from playing alone, and I feel like I learned a lot. It’s all thanks to the <Coach of Tennis>.”

“...Yea... because it was a fight... huh. ...Then, that time when you visited the Gamers Club...”

“L-look, Tendo-san! More importantly, your second match is about to start!”

“Eh, oh, y-yea. I’ll be off, then.”

“Ok, take care.”

After saying goodbye and making sure that she got to her destination, I unintentionally let out a deep sigh and looked at my own hand.

“(Yes, this feeling of satisfaction. Challenging a difficult obstacle, and overcoming it with all my might... Because I have these moments, games are... no, an everyday life filled with accidents is the best.)”

Grabbing my trembling hands in excitement, I looked towards the monitor to

check the location of my second match.

*

After the momentum from beating Echizen, I made my way through the preliminaries and eventually won the group B tournament.

After the simple award ceremony finished, Tendo-san and I made my way back. Leaving the stuffy arcade, the air outside was really refreshing... It's not like the arcade was uncomfortable, but I felt relieved, as if I returned to the world I belonged to.

"At any rate, you're amazing, Misumi-kun. For someone who just started playing that game, you got a lot better."

While walking side-by-side, Tendo-san would praise me from time to time. However, it looks like she considers winning group A handily was a natural and obvious outcome. With a bitter smile, I replied to Tendo-san, who was the same as ever.

"No, you're exaggerating things, Tendo-san. I... I was just desperately trying to hold on by imitating others."

"Your ability to concentrate isn't normal, Misumi-kun. Even Kase-senpai has recognized you."

"No, like I was saying... Also, today's tournament was actually a really friendly match for beginners."

"Ah—... Well, that's certainly true, but..."

Tendo-san nodded. Her best virtue is not overestimating or underestimating other people.

Tendo-san touched her chin in thought, and then continued talking.

"Today's preliminaries was restricted to a small region and had that 'festival' kind of feeling, so for a genre like tennis games, the competition ends up having a lot of beginners. For a structure like that, it really suited your fast growth rate. But..."

"Yea, I also understood that. If the match was completely decided on a single game, I wouldn't be able to do anything. My complete loss in my first game to

Echizen-san is a good example. If that was the end of the match, I wouldn't have been able to improve."

"Yea. I think it's a completely worthy assessment of your skills, but sadly, the opponents in the next round will gradually get harder and harder. In other words..."

"Unlike this time, I won't be able to get used to a completely different game from the beginning, huh."

To my words, Tendo-san regretfully nodded.

"And another bad thing is that since TVGT is such a big competition, the schedule's usually really crowded. So..."

"So I have limited time to learn the games in advance. ...By the way, the next round is..."

"One week from today, Saturday."

"One week..."

Since I don't even have the Hyperbolic Time Chamber, making a dramatic power-up is pretty difficult.[\[2\]](#)

As one would expect, I pretty much gave up on my hopes of advancing any further. After pondering over something, Tendo-san looked at me with a sharp glint in her eyes.

"...If it's your growth rate, possibly..."

"?"

I tilted my neck, not knowing what she meant. Tendo-san stayed silent for a few seconds, collecting her thoughts, and then came up with a suggestion for me.

"It's pretty sudden, but tomorrow, Monday, I was thinking of going to the club. Since everyone has appointments, I can't make any definite promises, but I think I can force everyone to participate."

? Huh? Uh, that's fine with me, but, I don't think I have to be that extreme during club activities, you know? Actually, all I've been doing during club time is

just learning the controls and rules to each of these games.”

I was just trying to speak honestly and wasn’t trying to be humble, but Tendo-san denied it.

“No, the policy of our Gamers Club was wrong. In your case, it is more important to experience the actual competition rather than learning the fundamentals. If you look at the match between you and Echizen, that much is clear.”

“Hah... Well, I certainly do like competing, but...”

Remembering the exhilaration of the competition, my body trembled. Facing an overwhelmingly strong opponent, thinking desperately of ways to defeat them despite looking up to them, trying out different strategies and getting experience from each attempt, and attempting to make note of their skills and using it myself... At last, I felt what I was longing for since the beginning and exceeded it; you could call it ecstasy.

Certainly, the compressed exhilaration is much better than aimlessly playing games. I feel like there’s absolutely no truth to Amano-kun’s “Slow, fun game theory” that I heard about from Tendo-san. I understood what it meant to confront a strong man for the first time.

...Huh? Confront a strong man for the first time? ...Ah, in other words, my growth...

Suddenly understanding what I have to do from now on, Tendo-san smiled broadly as if she was confirming my answer.

“The members of the Gamers Club, except for me, all specialize in a certain genre. In other words, in the week before the competition, you will keep playing those remarkable senpais over and over again—”

“Are you hoping for a... remarkable growth?”

In the breeze of the early summer, the trees by the road rustled.

With the setting sun in the background, and with a confident look similar to that of Echizen’s, Tendo-san declared the name of her strategy.

“Let us start Operation ‘History’s Strongest Disciple Eiichi’!”^[3]

*

And thus, I started the journey to become the strongest all-purpose player.

However, the road through TVGT starting from now is a long tale in a short amount of time, and if this were a comic, would take about 20 volumes to complete.

For this reason, from now on, I will only tell the important points of the story.

“History’s Strongest Disciple Eiichi, Digest~”

First of all, by playing with my senpais, I gained the skills in FPS and fighting games to approach the top players. Of course, I wasn’t able to reach Kase-senpai and Oiso-senpai’s overwhelming skill overnight, but I was able to win 2-3 games out of 10.

Furthermore, by playing Tendo-san and the two kouhais, I was able to learn a new special ability, “Instant Draw”, that makes the best use of my learning ability. By boosting my powers of concentration, it’s an ability that lets me copy my enemy’s moves perfectly for a duration of three minutes. Imitating someone, by itself, can only result in a draw at best, but for my ability, “Quick Growth”, the ability to “earn time” is irreplaceable.

In this way, I was able to easily pass through local tournaments, but once I reached the semifinals, I unexpectedly struggled in a match for the first time.

This time, the genre was “Rhythm games”, and as one would expect, it was one of the genres that I didn’t practice in the past week. Furthermore, the opponent this time was—

“Give up, Eiichi! Your journey ends here!”

“R-riki!? Why are you here!?”

—my step-sister, Misumi Riki.

Actually, Riki's super good at rhythm games, and had me cornered this time. What's more, she...

"You going to nationals together with Tendo-san, I won't allow iiitttt!"

...Saying those kinds of things, she entered with a strange fighting spirit. Feeling shaken and unable to do my best seriously, I was rapidly being cornered even further.

When I thought I was going to be defeated instantly... suddenly, Tsundere glasses-senpai, also known as Kase Gakuto-senpai, who always thinks of his kouhais and secretly came to watch, fiercely rebuked me, who had already given up.

"You're not a man who would lose here! Misumi Eiichi!"

After I regained myself from those words, I started to go after her. Using my skill <Instant Draw>, I stayed close in points, and during the match, I developed another skill... <Strongest Follower> and put that to use as well. By imitating her skill and making it my own, I was able to barely beat Riki. I won and advanced to the finals. (By the way, Riki looked like she was about to cry, but when I hugged her and patted her on the head, her mood got better and she returned home.)

However, when I then arrived at the finals, my opponent was...

"Finally, you've come all the way here, Misumi-kun..."

"Tendo-san..."

the existence that could be called my shisho of games, Tendo-san.

The genre was racing games. ...I hadn't mastered this type of game, and also, it was a genre that Tendo-san was good at.

The atmosphere became tense, and the game finally started. ...If I spoke honestly, at this point in time, since I just got another skill from the battle with Riki, I had the confidence that I would beat her.

However, my composure was broken in a split second.

In a best of seven, I was handily beaten in the first three races. ...If she takes

one more game, I'll lose without even being able to grow.

Tendo-san smiled, as if sneering, and about to reveal a secret trick to me, who was dumbfounded.

"Did you think that I wouldn't have a countermeasure for your growth ability, <Learn From Strong Enemies>?"

"By any chance... for these last three games, have you been using 'Moderation Play'!?"

"Fufu, noticing now is too late, Misumi-kun. I've been holding back my strength. In the next game, no matter what ability you use... you can't learn enough to beat me!"

"Damn... !?"

"You may think it's underhanded, but it's the president's duty to take a new member down a notch or two!"

With her declaration, the fourth race started. Even from the start, Tendo-san pulled way ahead. Even when I continued to use <Instant Draw> and <Strongest Follower>, she pulled into high gear and surpassed my growth.

When the match was nearly decided... in the bottom of my heart, something awoke.

<Do you want... power...>

"(...! ...I want power... I don't want to lose! I... want to win!)"

<Alright... that determination is good... here, take this...>

In the next moment, I thought I was able to see a line above the course, and as if my hand was following the course, the car automatically started to move.

"Hey—"

I started to pursue Tendo-san right on her heels, the voices of Tendo-san and the crowd fading away. In the last lap, finally...

“I-it’s a lie, right!?”

Barely overtaking Tendo-san, I passed the finish line.

Looking at me in disbelief, she grit her teeth and exclaimed, “The next race is the last, so I’m going to be serious now!”. After playing the 5th, 6th, and 7th races with all my might, I now...

“...This...”

“...”

After completely beating Tendo-san, I smiled broadly.

—And so, the curtains closed on the bumpy road through the local tournament with my overall victory.

My new ability helped me rampage through the nationals that started a week later.

<Glorious Road>

The ability allows me to perceive the “Road to Victory” once I understand both the game and my opponent. My eyes, mind, and body all move together to ensure a victory.

With this ability, no matter how strong all the participants were at the nationals, no one was a true opponent.

People with skills like “Wing”, the ability to treat a soccer ball in a game as a friend, “Data Game”, the ability to do quick mental computation, and other people like a mysterious gamer who plays dance games with fishing poles, a pachinko pro blessed with luck, and even a cheat onee-san like Tatsumi... anyway, I piled up victories over everyone.^[4]

However, after getting through nationals and having arrived at “World Championships”, as one would expect, I had several difficult battles.

Starting with a beautiful silver-haired female spirit, “Shinra” harassed me with a bunch of completely inexplicable phenomenon that crossed the boundaries of a game.

The Indian representative, whose favorite saying was “Things will probably work out well”, made me tremble with her mysterious positive attitude from beginning to end.

The battle with the French representative, who had the ability <Elimination Impossible>, was the toughest battle in since I wasn’t able to imitate him at all.

After such various battles, it was the finals at last.

“...Ex... we met... long ago...”

My opponent appeared, calling me with a strange name. Wearing the same exact uniform as I was when I awoke, the mysterious girl’s name was Machina.
[5]

With impressive blue hair, the girl stayed emotionless and silent, and whenever I asked a question, she would always reply with “If you win, I’ll tell you”. And as I was feeling uneasy and anxious, the finals, which were puzzle games... started with a one-sided beatdown by Machina.

It wasn’t uncommon for me to struggle in the beginning with my growth, but her game technique was too far off the beaten path.

In the world, there is a way of playing a game by using Tool Assist and getting the “highest possible score” in a game. Her playstyle was just like that.

She easily approached the limits of the system, without making a mistake.

<Maximum>

This ability is certainly the strongest ability.

Machina handily won the first three games of the finals, which was a first to 4 series. The crowd was silent because of the one-sided game.

When I was crushed with hopelessness... several voices of encouragement rang out from the crowd, breaking the silence.

Looking out towards the crowd in surprise, I saw the Gamers Club members who had taught me how to play games, my precious younger sister Riki, and... all the opponents that I had played to get here.

With the willpower to “not give up”, I used all of my ability and started playing without thinking of the consequences.

Desperately stealing Machina's playstyle, I was able to pull off a draw by getting the highest possible score.

"You're only exhausting yourself in vain, Ex..."

Not minding Machina, who was looking at me in pity, I continued to desperately keep up.

The series continued, and reached about 20 draws.

"Ah..."

Finally Machina made a slight... a very slight mistake, and in that gap, I finally took a game.

The crowd erupted in cheers. Like that, I took two, three games off her, but Machina regained her composure, and the draws started to pile up again.

Machina, noticing that a cold sweat had appeared on my forehead from all the overworking, urged me to surrender.

"Ex will never win against Machina like this. You're only shortening your lifespan. You should quit now."

"Is that... so?"

"?"

I smiled broadly. ... In the next moment, my eyes looked like the world was shining.

<Glorious Road> started operating.

In that moment, universe; nature; I felt like I could understand anything.

"Hey... this is..."

As Machina and the whole crowd held their breath, I silently operated the controller as if I was God.

These movements aren't the same as trying to obtain the "highest possible score".

Only because I have a body that can grow, this is possible. Furthermore, those mysteries from before... I was able to use those strange moves that were

astronomically difficult to reproduce.

This miracle-like ability to widen horizons—it was the revelation of the new skill, <Expansion>.

“Lies... this is...”

“This... ends here!”

Surpassing the highest possible score, at last, I crushed Machina.

Even though it fell silent for a second, the crowd started cheering excitedly, and my friends came running over towards me.

As the venue, no, the world, started to get wildly excited, Machina walked towards me.

“Ex... ...Machina, completely, lost.”

“Machina... ...Won’t you tell me? What kind of people are we?”

“Of course. ...But after this.”

For the first time, she broke her expressionless look and smiled.

“Congratulations, Ex. You’re the true champion of the gaming world.”

—And so, the curtains closed with vigor on the story of the game tournament.

“History’s Strongest Disciple Eiichi Digest~” Fin



*

“...Fu.”

TVGT... Total Video Game Tournament World Championships, one week later.

After having gone through all those hardships, I returned to my school life... now standing in front of the clubroom, I let out a sigh.

Because...

“(Going to the Gamers Club... is there even any meaning to it?)”

After school, I walked to the Gamers Club out of habit, but... after having made my way to the door, I suddenly had this doubt.

With my backpack on my shoulders, I stared at the doorway.

“(Honestly, I’m already... better at games than anyone in this world. Although that’s not the exact reason, I fear that it’s likely that Kase-senpai and Oiso-senpai aren’t even close to me in level. In this situation... if I left the Gamers Club, what should I do from now on?)”

Even winning the national tournament didn’t appeal at all. ...In other words, I need somewhere to use my enthusiasm for games, not easy objectives like that one. It’s like the feeling of Son oku fighting Yamoia right after beating Froza.

Looking down at my hands, I clasped my hands a few times.

“(Should I... stop playing games? According Machina’s story, the organization I was in is a very shady organization, and she said she participated in the game tournament because it looked fun. ...What meaning is there to keep playing games...)”

At any rate, deciding that I didn’t have to do club activities anymore, I left the area before someone could find me. ...It’ll probably be fine to tell them I’m quitting later.

Leaving the old school building that the clubroom was in, I started making my way home. While wondering whether or not Riki and the new freeloader, Machina, were fighting at home, I saw the back of a person I strangely missed.

Unlike the usual timid me, I ran over and assertively called out to him.

“Amano-kun! Long time no see!”

“? Oh, M-misumi-kun. I-i-it’s been a while!”

His face flushed when he noticed me, and in a panic, the small animal-like male student bowed, unbefitting of someone the same age I am.

I made a wry smile at Amano-kun, who was acting as usual, and started walking next to him.

“Amano-kun, are you also going home right now?”

“Ah, y-yea! ...? Uh, Misumi-kun, are you not going to the Gamers Club?”

“Ah, yea, well...”

I returned a vague smile. Amano-kun, without doubting my reply, only said “I see” and continued walking.

For a while, we were talking talking about ourselves. During the time I was at the game tournament, Amano-kun seems to have joined a “Gamer’s Hobby Club”. He talked about people I didn’t know like Uehara-kun and seaweed girl, so I didn’t really understand what he was saying, but I only knew that he was having fun.

“Ah, sorry, I was only talking about me. How was your game tournament, Misumi-kun?”

“Huh? Oh, yea...”

I didn’t know how to reply to that. In the past month, my various experiences and incidents should be “interesting stories” that are far beyond Amano-kun’s “ordinary life”. Filled with the extraordinary, tons of mysteries, and lots of stories. Even though it was wonderful, I didn’t feel like talking about it to Amano-kun.

“Well, I ended up winning... uh, thanks to the Gamers Club.”

To my answer, Amano-kun, who is the type to have fun playing games by himself regularly, replied and said “Heh, that’s amazing, Misumi-kun!” with an extremely ordinary answer, as if he didn’t know much about game tournaments.

I thought about telling him that “I’m the best in the world”, but instead, I continued to talk conversationally with him.

As we continued to talk back and forth for a bit, Amano-kun's expression suddenly brightened and asked me a question.

"Oh right, Misumi-kun! Since you're free today, do you want to play a game with me?"

"? With you, Amano-kun?"

"Yea! Actually, one of my favorite open source game developers recently released a new game, but it's a fighting game, which is pretty uncharacteristic of them. But I also don't have anyone to play with other than my younger brother... also, he doesn't have any interest in open source games, so I don't know what to do."

"Oh... so in other words..."

"Yea! Misumi-kun, I'd be happy if you'd play with me!"

"..."

I faltered from Amano-kun's innocent proposal. ...Even though he doesn't know it, he's challenging the best of the world right now. ...Gently refusing right now is probably best for him—

"Misumi-kun, you've played a few games in the Gamers Club, right? Then it's ok! This game is a fighting game that can be played by beginners! Please?"

"..."

This is dangerous. For some reason, I started to feel a bit annoyed. I guess you can call it arrogance, but... having become the best gamer in the world a few days ago, being challenged by someone like Amano-kun, who isn't even good at games...

When I noticed, I was smiling at him.

"Alright. Let's do it, Amano-kun. I've also played a few games."

I already regretted it, thinking "What a bad personality!", but it was already too late.

To Amano-kun, who was happily smiling, I couldn't just turn around and quit now.

*

Amano-kun's house was completely different from the Misumi family's house. It was an extremely normal two-story building, which was neither old nor new, and it was really the "typical middle class house".

While he was telling me that no one else was home, I walked into the house, said "Sorry for the intrusion", and then headed towards Amano-kun's room, which was on the second floor.

As I walked up the stairs, which creaked every once in awhile, suddenly... even though I probably don't have any experience being raised in a middle-class family, I felt extremely nostalgic.

"T-there's not much, but thanks for coming."

While blushing like a girl, Amano-kun let me into his room, which was practically "THE room for a quiet boy". There were lots of games and manga lying around, and although there were a few wires here and there, the room was mostly neat. It was a typical room that left a deep impression on me.

"(As I thought, when I'm with Amano-kun, I can understand what it means to be an <ordinary protagonist>.)"

While thinking these thoughts, he quickly put down his bag and sat on a cushion in front of the TV.

After doing something with his computer and the TV, he handed me a wireless controller. It looks like he hooked his computer up to the monitor.

"(...A wireless controller and an external monitor, huh... I'm worried about the latency, but...)"

As a person that lived in the world of milliseconds and frames, I was uneasy about the suboptimal gaming environment. I was irritated for a moment, but I told myself that this wasn't a tournament. While I was calming myself down, Amano-kun finished setting up the game and then started it up. After grabbing his controller and sitting down next to me, he started to talk excitedly.

"Ah, I'll go easy on you for now, so it's ok! Let's have fun, Misumi-kun!"

—As one would expect, I got annoyed. I know it's childish, but... even then, I, as the best in the world, shouldn't be looked down upon like this.

Clutching the controllers tightly... I started to concentrate on the screen as if it were the finals.

“(It’s Amano-kun’s fault...)”

Amano-kun was player 1, and I was player 2. As the battle started, a light spread across my field of vision.

Since it was a game I've never seen before, I used <Instant Draw> as well as <Strongest Follower> and observed both the game and Amano-kun.

“(If it’s the me right now, even if I have to learn, I don’t think I’ll drop a single game...!)”

Even then, if I have 10 seconds, I'll also use <Glorious Road> and <Expansion>.

In reality, though, this open source game made by this person named “Nobe” was extremely shabby and looked like it was made by one person as well. It used free game assets, the key responses were crude, the character balance was off, and the motions were lacking. Everything is third-rate. To be honest, it didn't even take me 5 seconds to understand the whole game.

Also, Amano-kun wasn't very skilled either.

“Wah, Misumi-kun, you’re really good for your first time!”

“(The comparison is harsh, but... you’re worse than any of the participants in the tournament, Amano-kun.)”

As one would expect, it looked like he was familiar with the controls, but... that was all. Amano-kun was like that before, too. He doesn't put any importance on “growth”. Always stopped... a stagnated person. ...He's exactly a good-for-nothing, ordinary protagonist.

“(If this is what being “ordinary” is... then I don’t want this!)”

Getting worked up for some reason, and even though there's no need to, I—
<Instant Draw><Strongest Follower><Glorious Road><Expansion>

—used all the skills I've learned until now, and started to knock down Amano-kun.

And thus, the result was—

<1P Win!>

“—What?”

It was Amano-kun's victory.

I stared at the screen in complete disbelief like a senile old man. Amano-kun faced me with a wry laugh.

“Ehehe, it was my comeback win!”

“—Hah?”

Not knowing what he meant, I looked at his face with my mouth agape. ...I should have won. I should have been lowering his character's HP in flawless form.

And yet, in the next moment... my character collapsed

...Amano-kun responded with a bitter smile to my horrified expression as I wondered what kind of ability he used.

“S-sorry. If I were to tell you the trick, this game has an absurd ability that's like an outrageous command. The ability I used right now was 'Switch Sides'... well, I guess it's this character's special move?”

“—Hah!?”

What is this game design!? Isn't this just nonsensical!? This game is way too absurd, so my powers of observation couldn't even analyze the complete game.

While I was still in shock, Amano-kun continued to apologetically explain.

“It's not limited to this, but rather, this game by Nobe-san does this every round... It's really surprising, right?”

I only said a few words to Amano-kun, who was looking at me with upturned

eyes, as if he was looking for an opinion.

“Surprising or whatever, t-this...”

This game doesn’t make any sense. It’s not the ‘game’ I know. The moment after I was about to get mad.

Amano-kun, though he still looked apologetic, laughed out loud and looked towards me.

“But that’s good, Misumi-kun; it looks like you had fun.”

“—Huh?”

As I exclaimed loudly, the game screen suddenly switched and the monitor went dark. When I looked at my reflection...

I was smiling. Naturally, it was a wry smile, but... it’s been awhile since I last smiled and made such a soft expression.

While I was lost for words, Amano-kun continued.

“I don’t know why, but Misumi-kun, you looked really tense today for some reason. Ah, I-I thought... Misumi-kun was getting excited over a game like you did when you first joined the Gamers Club, so I thought you had a really pleasant look on your face... Ah, b-but, um, even though I say ‘pleasant’, I don’t mean anything weird, ok!?”

Even though no one would make that misunderstanding, Amano-kun denied it with a flushed face. ...As usual, he’s all over the place. But...

I looked once again at the TV monitor. The crude character selection screen was displayed.

“...One more time.”

“Eh? Oh, yea, ok!”

Changing my character this time, the fight started once again.

...This time, I didn’t use any abilities. Without focusing on winning, I simply

played the game like an idiot and let my instincts and body do the work.

...This playstyle isn't serious at all, unlike how Kase-senpai plays against his rivals in a tournament.

"Wah, what is this!? Why is my character suddenly being eaten by a shark!? Amano-kun!?"

"Ah, sorry, this is my character's killer technique <Eternal Shark Blizzard>. If you use it, your opponent dies."

"There's a limit to how unreasonable things can be!"

"It's ok! Look, it eats me right after! Furthermore, the shark's the one that wins!"

"There's a limit to how useless abilities can be!"

"Ahaha, right? But I wanted to show you this."

"Even if you lose after using it?"

"Yea. But it's funny, right?"

"...Yea. That's right. It's really funny, Amano-kun!"

When I noticed, I was playing the game, smiling, and without thinking about anything. It was my first time having fun with a game like this ever since I joined the club.

...Of course, there's no sense of "accomplishment" or "completion" in this room. Fiercely competing with veteran players, breathtaking stories, fate, or growth... none of it. By playing this game, I surely don't get any sense of accomplishment out of it.

It's completely stagnant. A moratorium. An element that doesn't need to be in my story. But...

While I continued to play like an idiot with Amano-kun, I started talking.

"Amano-kun."

"Hmm?"

He continued looking at the monitor and kept playing the game.

Even then, I clumsily said my true feelings to him.

“I think it was a really good thing that I got to be friends with you.”

“Ueh!?”

In that moment, Amano-kun, who was trembling more than necessary, dropped his controller, retreated to and collapsed in the mountain of comic books nearby.

“Uwa, wawa, wah! Dangerous! Dangerous!”

“Oh—! Good gracious, even with <Glorious Road> and <Expansion>, I didn’t expect this.”

“What!? W-what are you saying, Misumi-kun? Stop thinking of those embarrassing chuunibyou lines and help me!”

“Alright, time to attack Amano-kun’s character while you’re gone. Take that!”

“Hey, you demon! ...Ah, but my character has a special move that instantly kills the opponent with poison if you attack him while he’s not moving.”

“Waaaahhh!? What is this!? That’s terrible! Dammit, let’s play again, Amano-kun!”

“No, help me first! We’re friends, right!?”

“Ahaha, you’re funny, Amano-kun. It’s really great that I became friends with you!”

“How!? Right now, I’m only hearing you say bad things!”

“Ahaha! ...Oh, right, I was thinking of leaving the Gamers Club, yea.”

“So suddenly!? Or rather, just help me out!”

While looking at Amano-kun, who was crying out desperately, and the absurd game that was on the monitor... Softly, I wiped away the tears in the corners of my eyes.

This boy definitely has no relationship with Misumi Eiichi’s memory and tale of personal identity.

He wasn't an opponent that stood in my way, nor was he a strong ally, nor was he a key component to regaining my memory. Even in my personal story from now on, I don't think he'll have any relationship to the topic of games.

However, even then, this is the story I want to tell the most.

Since it lacks appeal as a light novel, it's a story that could've been completely omitted in this volume.

At the end of the day,

Starting from the time when the special main character who experiences something extraordinary is called out by the beautiful girl, he simply, and without too much trouble, plays with a friend—

—This is a story about a game.

Notes and References

1. [↑] Prince of Tennis reference
2. [↑] Dragon Ball Z
3. [↑] History's Strongest Disciple Kenichi (or Kenichi: The Mightiest Disciple)
4. [↑] There are various references here, one of which I think is to Captain Tsubasa, but I'm unsure about the others.
5. [↑] Ex Machina

Chapter 5

Tendo Karen and her Days in a Slump

Holding an assault rifle, a soldier ran through a snowy battlefield. The character was breathing heavily, and the screen had a whitish tint from the snow.

Coming out of my dash, I slowly advanced by making the soldier lean against the wall with his left shoulder. There were gunshots in the distance. I can't confirm where the enemy is, though.

"(...Let's go.)"

Making sure that the soldier had enough stamina, I broke out into a sprint once again.

However, in that next second—

<Boom!>

"Ah."

Suddenly, the whole screen turned red, and my soldier collapsed onto the snow. At the same time, the win conditions were reached and the game ended. The screen played the winning play of the game—in other words, it was a replay of my character.

...but that was not the case. The replay showed my soldier recklessly turning the street corner, meeting an enemy who was waiting for someone to show up with his knife, and getting killed silently.

...My mistake was perfectly timed.

I felt sorry towards my teammates for losing the game. If we consider my record, I did my fair share of contribution towards the team. However, since I lost the game by dying stupidly, I couldn't help but feel frustrated

"Tendo." "Yea..."

At the urging of Kase-senpai, who was one of my teammates, we both left the online match. Right then, I completely used up all of my concentration, and at last, felt like I returned to the real world.

As usual, it was the Gamers Club's clubroom. Kase-senpai and I were using two monitors to play FPS games, while Oiso-senpai and Misumi-kun were playing fighting games on handheld gaming consoles. ...And like always, the two first-year girl ghost members were absent.

When I noticed, Kase-senpai went to the game console to change the game discs. Recognizing that it would normally be what a kouhai should do, I tried to stand up in a panic, but senpai gestured to stop.

Even though I felt a bit ashamed, it's not something you need two people to do.

While I was bored, watching him change the discs, Kase-senpai started talking as if he was going to make some small talk.

"Tendo. Did you get worse?"

"Ugh."

The sudden harsh words made me stiffen. I heard the sound of taking damage from Misumi-kun's handheld gaming console; it looked like he noticed my tense state,

A tense atmosphere wafted throughout the clubroom. However, it was only Misumi-kun and I that felt it, and the two other senpais were completely oblivious to it. Oiso-senpai was focusing on the next match, and Kase-senpai continued to speak bluntly as he was changing the discs.

"And it's not only just FPS games; lately, it seems like you've been losing more often."

"R-really?"

"Yea. I feel like you've been losing concentration and hesitating a lot."

"Uh..."

"Is your physical condition bad? From studying or from lack of sleep? ...But the exam was a while ago, wasn't it?"

“A while ago, huh?”

As usual, senpai is really indifferent about things other than games. However, I was grateful that he brought up the tests. Using that, I tried to change the topic.

“Speaking about exams, Kase-senpai and Oiso-senpai, you guys were ranked surprisingly high this time.”

“Saying ‘surprisingly’ is rude, you know.”

While adjusting his glasses, Kase-senpai looked back at me as he finished changing the disks. In the back, Oiso-senpai also replied indifferently as she continued to play loudly on her handheld gaming device.

“People who are good at games are people who are smart.”

“That’s some convenient logic right there.”

I made a wry smile because of Oiso-senpai’s far-fetched logic, but Kase-senpai agreed with her.

“Well, people who are bad at learning are bad at games.”

“Hah... is that how it is?”

I wouldn’t go as far as to say that that’s the case. There must be a lot of people who are mediocre at games but are actually smart. For example...

“Is A-amano-kun good at studying?”

I asked Misumi-kun while fidgeting a little. While looking down at his handheld game, he replied with, “I don’t know about his grades, but...”.

“Since he himself says that he’s mediocre... well, I think that he’s about average. At the very least, he’s not at the top.”

“I-I see...”

Although I hung my head in shame, Kase-senpai blew air through his nose and continued talking.

“Hey, it’s as I said. People who are mediocre at games are also mediocre at other things—”

“I don’t think that’s true at all!”

“...”

I shouted out loud, interrupting senpai’s words. The clubroom instantly fell silent. Even Oiso-senpai looked up from her game in surprise. Taken aback, I tried to wave my hands and smooth over the situation.

“Ah, no, um, uh, that’s, um, I don’t think that rankings are everything for gaming and studying...”

“? But that’s not what we were talking about?”

Kase-senpai tilted his neck in confusion, wondering what I was talking about. Oiso-senpai resumed her game and looked back down, and Misumi-kun was the only one looking at me in worry.

While I was still at a loss for words, Kase-senpai started to navigate the menu with his controller, and mumbled as he looked at the screen.

“...Tendo, by any chance, you haven’t lost your enthusiasm for games, right?”

“Ugh! It’s not like that! It’s not like that but...”

Suddenly I remembered Amano-kun’s stance on games. ...Right now, am I enjoying games more than he is? Did I lose sight of something somewhere? Lately, I’ve been having these thoughts... or should I say, Amano-kun has been on my mind lately.

“...Hey, the next game’s starting, Tendo.”

“Eh, ah, yea.”

I realized the Kase-senpai had finished and was waiting.

I hurriedly grabbed my controller and played the online FPS game, which was similar in appearance to the last game but slightly different. ...However.

—I, on this day, got the lowest score I’ve gotten since I started playing this game several months ago.

*

“Fu...”

Even though I was tired of the summer sun, I made my way towards downtown on my day off. It sounds better if you call it a stroll, but in truth, I was just escaping from reality.

“(I really... got worse at games...)”

It wasn’t just the games I played during club activities the other day; when I went home, I played the online game by myself, but the result was horrendous. It’s not limited to just FPS games. Fighting, racing, action, puzzle, strategy... I played badly, no matter the type of game.

...I can’t even say that my bad performance is only temporary. It really was as Kase-senpai said.

I got worse at games... no, at competing.

Suddenly stopping in front of a display window, I looked at my own reflection in the window. I saw my conspicuous blonde hair and blue eyes. People of all ages around me were looking at me as they passed by. That by itself is fine. It’s not new. I’m already used to it. The problem was...

“(I’m making an unhappy face...)”

The summer heat wasn’t the only reason why my face was drained of all energy.

Letting out a sigh, I resumed my aimless strolling.

“(The cause of my slump is... clearly, him...)”

I let out another deep sigh once again, right after the previous one. I have to admit this already.

I am being strongly influenced by Amano-kun.

If I were to say it more specifically, it’s his game style... My stoic playstyle is completely collapsing because my heart has accepted his way of thinking that prioritizes having fun since who knows when. In other words, my thirst for victory has diminished.

But the confusing part was that I’ve only talked to Amano-kun a few times.

The number of times we've met is actually countable using my fingers, and for me to be that affected by his words... there's clearly something strange going on.

"(Speaking of strange... whenever I think about him, my body temperature goes up for some weird reason. ...I wonder if I'm still mad at him for refusing my invitation to the Gamers Club.)"

Am I really that narrow-minded? ...The reason doesn't feel exactly right, though.

At any rate, because of Amano-kun, my game skills have dulled.

"(Seriously... what a difficult person through and through.)"

If I think about it, I've been manipulated by him. The time when he rejected my invitation to the Gamers Club, that Gamers Hobby Club mess, and most importantly... the situation right now.

"(I really wish he would take responsibility!)"

Waving my arms wildly, I steadily made my way towards the town.!

"(W-when I say responsibility, that's not what I mean! That's not what I mean, ok!?)"

I tried to take back my poor word choice in a panic when I realized what I had said. I don't know who it was for, though. Even then, my face inevitably burned up. ...Ah, mou!

As if I was trying to leave behind my hazy thoughts, I walked down the road with quick steps with my head down—

"Oh." "Sorry."

—but bumped into someone as I turned the corner. Just like yesterday's FPS game. Lately, I've been feeling under the weather. This, that, everything is his—

"Oh, uh, Tendo-san?"

I quickly looked up, hearing a voice I recognized. The owner of the voice was...

"Huh!? A... A-amano-kun!?"

"Y-yeah. Uh... um, hi..."

The small-statured, timid boy who was as apologetic as ever... Amano Keita was standing in front of me while averting his gaze.

However, I was acting equally as suspicious this time. Unable to calmly reply as I usually do during this chance encounter, the resulting situation was...

“...”

“...”

Both of us were squirming, unable to look directly at each other even though we were facing each other... somehow, we looked like an innocent elementary school couple.

After clearing my throat and regaining my senses, I forced my usual “diplomatic smile”, and interacted with him in a comfortable and relaxed manner.

“Oh, fancy seeing you here, Amano-kun. Are you out shopping?”

While brushing my hair with one hand, I lightly hugged myself with the other while standing beautifully. Like a model.

Alright, perfect. This is the usual Tendo Karen. I made a triumphant pose in my mind.

Amano-kun, though... as usual, he was avoiding looking in my direction. Well, no matter how composed he is, he'll eventually end up like that.

“I-I, um, uh... ... w-was wandering?”

“H-huh?”

My eyes spun at the unexpected answer and Amano-kun scratched his cheek. He continued to talk in embarrassment.

“...I was playing games from the morning at home, but my mom got mad. After leaving my house, I lost my way, so I've just been helplessly wandering outside...”

“...A-ah, is that so...”

What kind of stupid answer is that! I never thought that I would meet another second-year high school student that was strolling around, looking even more

helpless than I was.

And why does this person openly admit to such a sad reason? —As I was thinking such thoughts, his face suddenly made an expression that said “Oops”. It seems like he somehow realized what he just said. As his face gradually turned red, he also looked more disheartened.

“...Fufu.”

? Tendo-san?”

While looking at him, who was the same as ever, I unintentionally let out a laugh. If I think about it, he’s always been this way. Suspicious, nervous behavior... an awfully humane person. My “complete perfection” is radically different from the other people around me. But because of that, I can act with confidence.

After I continued to laugh quietly for a bit at Amano-kun’s embarrassed face, I briefly apologized to him and spontaneously asked him a question.

“If that’s the case, Amano-kun, do you want to walk with me? I don’t have any plans either.”

“Eh, ah, yea, sure.Wait, w-what!?”

After reflexively accepting, he then understood what I meant and became startled.

Becoming flustered, he replied incoherently.

“No, eh, that’s, for someone like for me to be with Tendo-san on a day off, um, I don’t deserve it!”

“You don’t deserve it?”

I never thought that someone in the same grade would say those words to me.

“Um, uh, yea... ...As I thought, it’s not good! Yea!”

After pondering over it for a few seconds, Amano-kun arrived to that conclusion. This guy, really... He always rejects my invitation every time, as if it was on purpose.

But this time, I won't accept that answer.

For some reason, I'm bothered by his nature. It wouldn't hurt to accept my invitation once in a while.

"Why? Amano-kun, do you hate me?"

With upturned eyes, I asked him a question with slightly malicious intent. Amano-kun's face turned red and immediately denied it with all his power.

"It's not like that!"

"What?"

I was the one who brought up the question, but I didn't expect him to deny it so fiercely with such an angry look. I stared at him blankly... and for some reason, my cheeks became hot in embarrassment.

Amano-kun took back his words in a panic.

"Ah, no, that's because, it's not good when you walk with me. Like before, strange rumors will pop up."

He's probably talking about the time I invited him to the Gamers Club when he said "before". Since I don't talk to boys very often, it certainly became a rumor back then. But such an issue is trivial to me. Even though I've refused every single one, I have been confessed to by many boys, so I'm no longer surprised by the strange rumors that pop up from the gossip around school. So, even if rumors pop up that I was walking around with Amano-kun, I'm not particularly...

...

"Tendo-san? W-what's wrong? Your face is red for some reason..."

"No, i-it's nothing. It's nothing, yea."

"? Really?"

Amano-kun looked at me in worry. Unable to take his gaze, my cheeks flushed red and I averted my eyes.

"(R-really, why am I like this? Why now...)"

I don't understand why I feel so disturbed. While I was thinking to myself,

Amano-kun apologetically lowered his head, looking like he misunderstood something once again.

“Uh, well, it’s something like that, so please excuse me for today—”

“Stop!”

“O-ok!?”

I pulled at his shirt sleeve in a panic. Amano-kun looked at me nervously. Even though I was surprised at myself for stopping him, I steeled my nerves and spoke up boldly.

“I-it’s a stroll!”

“Um?”

“T-this is ‘two people walking together’, not a d... d-‘date’ at all, ok!? So, it’s fine if you just walk with me!”

“Um...No, that’s really not the problem—”

“It’s fine, so let’s go, Amano-kun!”

Pulling him by the sleeve, we started to walk quickly.

Feeling awfully embarrassed at the situation, he shouted “I got it, I got it, so!” and made me let go of his sleeve.

As we walked side by side, I sent him a glare to stop him from running away.

Amano-kun, trembled after seeing my glare and reluctantly started to walk together with me.

Letting out one big sigh, he mumbled, having given up on getting away.

“...Well, that’s... um... w-where shall we go? Tendo-san.”

“Now you’re talking.”

He awkwardly returned a smile after I replied to his question with a smile on my face.

*

“Um, you know—”

As we arrived at my favorite game shop, Amano-kun mumbled with an amazed expression.

I asked him a question, looking sullen.

“Oh. Are you unhappy about coming here?”

“Ah, no, that’s not what I mean...”

“This isn’t a date, we’re out on a walk. I said that earlier, right?”

“No, if it’s a walk, why are we at a game shop first... wait, oh, this is the game I was interested in! Let’s see...”

“Aren’t you already having more fun than me...”

I wryly smiled and started exploring the store. Well, since I’ve been troubled by games lately, it’s certainly strange that I decided to go to a game store during our walk.

But after all, the first thing that comes to mind as a change of pace for me is games. I can’t do anything about that.

I didn’t have a particular game that I wanted to buy, but I looked at the shelves in great interest.

“(...Speaking of which, I talked to Amano-kun for the first time in this store.)”

Looking at Amano-kun’s back through the cracks of the shelves, I remembered that time. Back then, each of the members in the club wanted to invite more gamers.

To tell the truth, I knew people who were better at games than Misumi-kun and Amano-kun back then, but...

“(I saw him walking out of this game shop with a smile on his face, after all.)”

I always dropped by here to keep an eye out for other students, so I noticed him one day. I knew him one-sidedly.

...Whenever he bought a new game, he would walk out holding a package under the arms, looking happier than anyone else in the world.

“(That’s... without even checking his skill, I instinctively invited him to the Gamers Club.)”

Eventually, I was refused, so I ended up looking like an idiot.

While I was thinking back on that time, Amano-kun, who apparently just finished reading the bottom of a package, looked for me in a bit of a panic, and excitedly walked over to me.

“S-sorry, I got too excited by myself...”

“No, it’s fine. We’re just walking around, so feel free to do whatever you want to do.”

“Well, it’s certainly difficult to look at games together...”

“Right?”

He looked like he wanted to ask, “Then why are you taking me into a game shop?”, but I ignored him and started looking through the store.

After having looked through the games for about five minutes, an idea suddenly struck me and I looked for Amano-kun.

He was standing in front of the used games shelf. And, the package he was holding...

“...’Golden Tricks’...”^[1]

Amano-kun was looking at that game for a while, which had a golden-haired bishoujo as the heroine in a dating sim. When I started to mumble behind him, he became startled and put the game back on the shelf.

“No, um, it’s not what you think! I-it was cheap, so, I just grabbed it!”

“It’s ok, Amano-kun. ...You’re a boy, after all.”

“Don’t act like a mother who discovered their son’s porn! I’m not buying this anyway!”

“...I see, not buying that... ...”

“Why are you disappointed now!?”

After having teased Amano-kun as much as I could, I started up a new topic.

“Well then, Amano-kun. Shall we go to the arcade afterwards?”

“Huh? It’s fine, but... games again?”

“? Amano-kun, you like games, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I also like games.”

“Right.”

“Then, since this is a two-person stroll, isn’t it only natural that we visit a game store and arcade?”

“...Huh? A... stroll?”

Amano-kun doesn’t look convinced anymore. Yea, to be honest, I can’t say that my words don’t sound strange anymore. I can’t say the reason directly, but I have to go to the arcade by any means possible.

In the end, I took the reluctant Amano-kun with me and headed towards the arcade.

On the way, Amano-kun asked me a question while feeling wary of the gazes of the people around us.

“Tendo-san, do you like playing arcade games?”

“Eh? Oh... well, for me, the ratio of playing games at home to at an arcade is about 7 to 3. Oiso-senpai and Misumi-kun like playing arcade games more. On the other hand, Kase-senpai seems to only play online FPS games.”

“Oh, I see.”

“How about you, Amano-kun?”

When I asked him a question in reply, Amano-kun smiled wryly.

“Not at all. I even used to dislike it a lot...”

Somehow, I understand him. People who play games at homes and go to the arcade to play are considerably different. Especially for someone like Amano-kun, who doesn’t have many friends and is the type to stay alone, it’s not surprising that he doesn’t like arcade games as much. But the thing that got me was...

“Used to’? You used to dislike it a lot...”

"Oh, yea. Lately, I've had the chance to play with other people, so I've been having a lot of fun with a lot of arcade games."

"Huh."

My heart thumped loudly when he said that. ...Amano-kun... at the arcade with someone else? Ah, speaking of which, I've seen him with Uehara-kun before... him, right? Yea. Right. It's him, yea. I should make sure...

"...U-um, Amano-kun? It's only for reference, but, um, who did you play with —"

"Oh, Tendo-san, we arrived. Is it this place?"

"Oh, we are! Yea! This is the place, uh-huh!"

I suddenly looked back, feeling disturbed, and walked into the store in a panic. ...I completely lost my chance to ask the question.

"(No, it's definitely Uehara-kun. Yea.It's not anyone like Hoshinomori-san, or, um, the suddenly alleged girlfriend Aguri-san... right?)"

The more I think about it, I could imagine Amano-kun chatting and giggling with another girl, enjoying themselves as they played a crane game. ...In reality, by looking at his usual behavior, he's clearly not the type to do so, but if I say what I know of him—

"Tendo-san? Um, what's wrong?"

I replied absent-mindedly to Amano-kun's sudden and worried question.

"No, I was just disappointed and surprised that Amano-kun was the type of person to shamelessly go to an arcade with another girl."

"But wasn't it you that invited me!?"

"Oh."

When I noticed, Amano-kun had dropped his shoulders, said "There are too many trap choices... !", and became depressed. It looks like he thought that "going to an arcade with another girl" was referring to the current situation. ... Well, with how things were going, it was only natural to think that way.

When I opened my mouth to clear up the misunderstanding, I realized that

telling him my train of thought would also be a problem, so as a result...

“Oh, look, it looks like a variety of new game machines have come in!”

It looks like completely changing the topic was a solution that wasn’t well-received by Amano-kun.

“Hah... yea...”

“(Ah, he’s clearly feeling depressed now! S-sorry, Amano-kun.)”

Even though I apologized over and over in my heart, I couldn’t say my true intentions.

Anyway, I tried to get him to forget about it as quickly as possible and pulled on his sleeve forcibly.

The arcade we arrived at was a three-story building that was different from the one I saw Amano-kun and Uehara-kun at in the past.

Without even looking around the first floor, which had crane games and photobooths aimed towards families, I headed straight for the second floor, which had video games.

While I was still pulling on his sleeve, Amano-kun laughed in a strained voice.

“Tendo-san, you’re really consistent.”

“?”

“Ah, no, see, I was just thinking that you were the opposite of Aguri-san, who would immediately bite at the chance to win a prize at one of the crane games.”

“Oh, certainly, I don’t really have much of an interest in those things—”

When I said that much, I realized something.

“(...Isn’t Amano-kun somehow strangely familiar with Aguri-san’s personality!?)”

I was sweating. ...Is there something between them after all?

“(But... I’ve heard from people that she and Uehara-kun were dating. But... Hoshinomori-san’s testimony also had credibility...)”

While my brain ran around in circles, I passed the video game floor without

realizing it and arrived at the third floor, which had medal games. [2]

Looking back at Amano-kun in surprise, I saw that he also had a look of uncertainty.

“...Um, Tendo-san? Are you... going to play medal games?”

“Huh? Oh—...”

It seems like he expected me to go to the video game corner. ...To be honest, that was my plan all along.

At any rate, the reason I dragged him to the arcade was so that I could play against him.

“(If I played a game with Amano-kun once again... somehow, I thought that I would be able to understand how to break out of my slump, but...)”

What should I do now, having come to the medal game floor? There aren’t any fighting games, nor are there any puzzle games. Letting out a sigh, I cleared my throat to distract him, and looked back at Amano-kun to go back down a floor—

“Oh, we must’ve come here to kill some time as a change of pace as we play medal games! As expected of Tendo-san. I didn’t think of that at all.”

“...Sure?”

Suddenly, Amano-kun’s eyes glittered, having come up with a reason for my actions by himself.

Ignoring me, who had stopped moving, he made his way to the middle of the medal game floor.

I chased after him in a panic... Standing in front of the medal exchange machine, he pointed towards a sticker and looked back at me with a grin.

“Look, Tendo-san! Once a month, they give three times the medals, and that’s today. We’re lucky!”

“Y-yea, we are. That’s definitely great value.”

“Right? For now then, since today’s special, let’s spend about 500 yen.”

“Yea, sure—uh, no, um, w-wait—”

Amano-kun put his hand into his pocket, pulled out a single 500 yen coin, and put it into the machine before I could say anything to stop him. The medals jingled as they came out the machine and into the cup.

“Oh—...”

“? What’s wrong, Tendo-san? You’re making a face as if a magician in your party just wasted his MP on some useless stuff.”

“Why can’t you have been more perceptive like this earlier!?”

“Ueh!? D-did I do something bad?”

Amano-kun became frightened as he held the cup of medals, which jingled loudly.

Sighing deeply, I took out my purse from my pouch, stood in front of the machine, and exchanged my own 500 yen for medals.

Holding my cup, I glared at Amano-kun, who was shrinking back in fear. And then... in the next moment, I thrusted my finger towards him.

“Let’s have a match, Amano-kun!”

“? Huh?”

Amano-kun looked at me blankly while tilting his head. I continued to speak with firm resolution.

“This isn’t what I intended to do... but it’ll work. Let’s have a match with medal games this time, Amano-kun!”

“H-huh. ...Um, if this wasn’t what you meant to do, then we don’t have to do this...”

“Amano-kun!”

“Y-yes!”

“You made a very good choice. Certainly, if it’s a medal game... where practically everything is decided by luck, I can compete seriously with you!”

“Putting aside the fact that you subtly dissed my gaming skills... compete earnestly, is it?”

“Yea! This is... the deciding match with my life and my comeback on the line!”

“It’s my first time seeing someone so enthusiastic about medal games!”

“Amano-kun! I will definitely defeat you! And then I will retake what I have lost!”

“...Um, well, then should I lose?”

I replied in indignation when Amano-kun hesitantly suggested to throw the match.

“D-don’t joke around like that! Trying to withdraw from a serious match... You’re the scum of gamers! Shame on you!”

Amano-kun replied in bewilderment to my exasperated words.

“But, um, I have nothing to lose... and Tendo-san, you said that your life depended on this match, so...”

“That’s...! ...T-that’s a figure of speech! Ignore that part! Nothing’s on the line for me! Nothing, ok!? ... W-whee whoo~”

“What is that really unsettling whistle!? It’s actually really scary!”

“! You’re a really fussy person! I-if you’re like that, girls will hate you!”

“Isn’t my favorable impression rapidly dropping today somehow!?”

“Anyway! This is a medal game match, Amano-kun! Alright... 30 minutes! After 30 minutes, we’ll come back here, and the person with more medals is the winner! Do you understand!?”

“H-hah, I got it...”

“Then, in 30 minutes! ...Game start!”

As I announced the start of the match, I started to speedwalk around the floor while looking around for places to invest my medals in.

“(The most orthodox game would be the pusher game. A simple, classic, and visually appealing game where the goal is to use the timing of the pusher to push already-existing mounds of coins off the ledge. But...)”

After seeing a lot of elderly people and families around the circular machine, I grimaced.

“(The machine’s way too popular, like I thought it would be. And naturally, the empty spots are...)”

I quickly checked the LCD display. ...As expected, all the good spots are taken. Lately, this sort of game has bingo and sugoroku elements added to it, and each seat accumulates points that are shown on the display. In other words, a person who is able to get a seat with a high number will profit a lot, but since this game is popular, good seats are taken fast. [3]

“(It’s a fun game with various elements, but since today’s goal is to get as many medals as possible in a short amount of time, it’s not the best...)”

Quickly coming to a decision, I ruled out pusher games. By the way, it’s only been about ten seconds since the start of the match.

While constantly thinking over my strategy, I looked over at Amano-kun to see what he was doing, And, he was...

“Alright!”

“(Hey—)”

The pusher game that I ruled out in the very beginning... and furthermore, he went to the seat with the lowest number of points without checking it just because no one was there and sat down.

I was dumbfounded for a second, but I snapped out of it and immediately analyzed his actions.

“(Is that his strategy!? Did I not see the number correctly? No... that’s probably not it. B-but, he can be attentive at times, so maybe...)”

“...Fumu fumu. ...Heh~... ... Oh, there was that kind of rule, huh...”

“(He’s a complete amateeeuuuuuuurrrrrrrr!)”

I nearly tripped. Amano-kun... he probably sat down because the pusher game caught his eye... Well, it’s just like him.

“(Somehow I feel like I’m losing my strength... But I won’t be careless! I, I will

do the very best I can! And then I will break away from Amano-kun's loose and easy-going nature!"

I firmly made a fist and resumed walking around the floor, hoping for a machine with a high income in a short amount of time.

Twenty minutes later, in front of the medal exchange machine. There was—

"..."

"..."

There was a girl holding a cup filled with medals to the very top without even having used up all the time, and a small-statured young boy who was feeling depressed.

Already knowing the result without even counting, I asked myself a question.

"(...Then what?)"

I didn't feel the exhilaration of victory nor any disappointment in Amano-kun's poor performance.

I felt nothing. The only result was the outcome that I anticipated from the start. Amano-kun prioritized having fun as always and suffered a crushing defeat. I prioritized getting points and so I won in a landslide. It wasn't interesting at all.

"Ahaha... as Tendo-san said, if it was medal games, the match would be more competitive, but... it was just pathetic."

"..."

As I watched Amano-kun drop his shoulders, I kept thinking to myself.

Certainly, he should've had a decent chance of winning. But... if, for example, he had won and I had lost, I feel like I would still have this strange feeling. ... there's nothing at all.

"(I have really... become half-hearted. I don't feel the exhilaration of winning. At the same time, I'm not like Amano-kun, who's satisfied with just having fun. ...I... what the hell is it that I want to do...)"

It's not even an exaggeration—I felt like I hit rock bottom. Amano-kun

must've also been sad, but... for me, this situation was painful.

Because... I no longer knew how to enjoy games.

The one thing that had always been a pillar of support in my heart just crumbled.

Feeling light-headed, I dropped a medal from my cup. Amano-kun sent me a sidelong glance, picked up the medal, and tried to return it, but he saw my vacant look and hesitated.

I laughed without any energy when I saw him hesitate, and talked carelessly.

"It's ok. You can have that medal as thanks for picking it up."

"Huh? Is it really fine? Woohoo, thank you very much!"

He bowed exaggeratedly. While thinking that he was a strangely innocent person as always, I looked around, wondering if I should put my remaining medals in the deposite machine. However, I noticed that Amano-kun was no longer there.

"Amano-kun?"

I looked throughout the store while calling out his name. I saw him at the place he was playing at originally for some reason... returning to his seat at the pusher game, he was looking at the machine with a serious look, trying to measure when to put his coin in.

Sitting on one side of the two-person seat, I looked at his face, combed my hair, and said, "Amano-kun?"

He became flustered when he noticed that I was close to him, and scratched his head in embarrassment.

"No, um, since you gave me this medal, I thought I would bet on the match with this..."

"Match? What match?"

"Eh? Of course, the one with Tendo-san about who could get the most medals..."

"Hah?"

“Huh?”

When I reacted in surprise at his unexpected words, he also replied in surprise.

I forcefully pulled his shoulders towards me and asked him.

“Um... Amano-kun, are you still trying to win?”

“Huh? No, I didn’t have any medals and didn’t get out of my last bet, so... But since I received a medal from Tendo-san, I’m aiming for a comeback victory. I still have some time left.”

Replying with an attitude that said, “Isn’t it obvious?”, he took up a posture to put the coin in once again, but I reflexively called out to him.

“Eh, w-wait a bit, Amano-kun.”

“W-what is it? Are you trying to stall? Don’t stop me, Tendo-san!”

Without looking in my direction, Amano-kun looked for the right time to put in the coin as he talked in a slightly irritated tone. Even then, I continued to ask him questions.

“W-why are you trying to win?”

“Because this is a competition!”

“But, you, you’re not that type...”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean, ‘that type’?”

Amano-kun closed one eye and carefully aimed the coin, replying to me in a slightly rude tone.

I gulped, feeling a hunch that a big assumption of mine was just about to be overturned, and asked the question that struck the heart of the manner.

“Isn’t it fine whether or not you lose...”

In reply to my words,

Amano-kun, while concentrating on the tip of his finger, told me his true intentions without any lies... and it was a big shock to me.

“The match is definitely more fun if you win!”

“(Eeeeeeeeuhhhhhhhhhhh!?)”

The biggest reason that I fell into this slump was “Amano Keita’s game stance”. While shouting words that completely ruined my theory, Amano-kun pushed the medal in.

And the result was—

“...”

“...”

It didn’t have any influence at all and only added to the mound of coins. The outcome felt like a failed punchline.

In the next instant, Amano-kun grabbed his head, taken aback.

“Ahh, mou! This is irritating!”

“Ir... irritating...?”

“Hah? Yea, irritating! I lost my last bet!? I!”

“Y-yea, but... but, isn’t it fine if you had fun in the process?”

“Huh?”

Amano-kun tilted his head in curiosuty. ...I’m the one who doesn’t understand, you know.

Sensing a family that wanted to play behind us, we left our seats in a panic, traded in my medals, and then left the arcade.

For a short while, we had a casual and carefree conversation as we walked through the city and we finally seemed to be taking the most “stroll”-like activity of today.... at a tree-lined passage in the park. Finally, I decided to ask what was on my mind.

“Amano-kun. Didn’t you... refuse to join the Gamers Club because you didn’t like to fuss over winning and losing?”

“W-why ask so suddenly? That’s... no, well... if I say it directly...”

Amano-kun must’ve thought that I was mad since he replied in an awkward

tone, his eyes downcast.

I started by reassuring him, saying “I’m not criticizing you or anything”.

“But a few minutes ago, you said that losing was irritating and tried your best even with your last medal to win, right?”

“Yes, I did.”

“...Isn’t that strange?”

“...Is it strange?”

It looked like Amano-kun didn’t understand what I was saying. Getting slightly irritated, I piled on the questions.

“After all, your top priority is to have fun when you play games, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Then, in other words, it doesn’t matter whether you win or lose, right?”

“No no no, it does matter whether I win or lose. I want to win.”

Looking upset, Amano-kun shot back a tsukkomi. In the end, I couldn’t understand at all.

“...Your claims aren’t consistent, Amano-kun.”

“Uu. Well, certainly, my beliefs aren’t as strong as Tendo-san’s... ...I still don’t think what I was saying sounded strange, though.”

“How? Isn’t it strange? Prioritizing having fun, and yet caring about the result of the match—”

When I said that much, Amano-kun interrupted me and said it directly.

“It’s about playing together, you know?”

“__”

I was dumbfounded when when he said a contradictory statement once again.

Rather than being concerned about the matter on hand, Amano-kun looked around, worried that we would be discovered by other Otobuki students. While walking, he offhandedly replied to my silence.

“But if I really didn’t care about winning or losing... then games wouldn’t be fun at all, no?”

“Ugh”

That’s right. That’s me right now. The one whose enjoyment of winning has diminished. But the one that doesn’t even enjoy playing; that’s the incomplete me.

Amano-kun suddenly looked upwards at the sky and gave an easy-to-understand analogy.

“Look, it’s not only about the competition. In an RPG, if you just sigh when the boss kills you... doesn’t that mean that the game needs tons of farming and that it’s a completely shit video game where the balance is off?”

“That’s... well, probably. ...B-but!”

Feeling unconvinced, I asked him a question.

“You said it before, right!? That you played games with your brother like fools while laughing out loud! If you play with that kind of feeling, doesn’t that just mean that you don’t care whether you win or lose? Am I wrong?”

“You’re wrong.”

“Huh?”

“Rather, it’s the opposite.”

“O-opposite?”

Amano-kun replied with a nod to my hysterical voice.

“Both of us always make a huge uproar about winning or losing. We say that [I will win next time], or that [today’s match was unfair so it didn’t count], and argue that we won, counting all previous matches. Well, you could say we argue over it like a massive scandalous dispute. It’s like a direct way for us to quarrel in a lighthearted way.”

“...”

“So when I say I like to play games with my brother, we both have massive mood swings from the outcome of the game.”

It felt like I was just hit on the head. I think I was just taught the natural way to enjoy playing games again.

And... he simply gave me what I was desperately looking for, like how I simply gave him the medal that he picked up for me.

While unintentionally shivering and feeling vulnerable, I continued asking questions.

“...What the hell? Then why, Amano-kun... did you not join the Gamers Club...”

“That’s because I simply lacked the willpower. Naturally, I want to win, but I didn’t have the enthusiasm to practice over and over again just to be able to win.”

“...”

“I think I’ve already said this before, but for me and my brother, games are for ‘amusement’.”

“I... I see.”

Amano-kun smiled warmly towards me with a grin. While feeling like I was gradually learning how to have fun with games again, I kept asking questions.

“Hey, Amano-kun. When you see... me trying my hardest only to win... and the Gamers Club as well, is it funny to you?”

“? What are you saying? It’s not like you to ask questions like that, Tendo-san.”

As if he was blowing all my troubles away, Amano-kun shouted while laughing, which unusually filled my whole body with confidence.

“The fact that I love winning and am so irritated at losing is the best part about playing games!”

“...Is that so.”

“So, from the bottom of my heart, I don’t think people who obsess about winning and use their irritation of losing as motivation to improve are funny!”

“...”

Noticing that my eyes were wet, I looked downwards in a panic. However, it didn't look like Amano-kun noticed at all, and scratched his head in embarrassment.

“Well, since I don't have the conviction and the willpower, rather than trying to improve my skills, I'm just running away by playing other games...”

“Fufu.”

“S-sorry...”

I unintentionally smiled as the negative Amano-kun apologized.

If things were as always, I would give him reassuring words, but...

“Really, my expectations for Amano-kun were betrayed.”

“U-uu... I'm really sorry for being disappointing in various ways...”

When I saw Amano-kun dejectedly drop his shoulders, I stuck out my tongue.

“(Well, I actually meant it in a good way, though.)”

But to say it so directly is a bit mortifying... and embarrassing.

I walked a few steps in front and turned back to look at him.

“Alright, this is where our stroll ends!”

“Eh!? Ah, yea, I understand, but... i-it's very sudden, you know?”

Did I do something rude?... said the uneasy expression on Amano-kun's face.

I waved my finger and smiled, denying his worries, and turned my back to him.

“Can't do anything about that.”

I raised my hand in lieu of a farewell, and—



“Right now, I want to play games, so I can’t help it!”

—started my journey towards home, where games were waiting, with energetic strides like the old “Tendo Karen” and completely unlike the “Tendo Karen” right before the stroll.

...

...However.

A later development

It was Monday after school at the clubroom.

“Tendo, you...”

“...”

After finishing a round of an FPS game, Kase-senpai put down his controller and started to talk with a meek expression.

Uncharacteristically, Misumi-kun and Oiso-senpai paused their game and were looking in our direction.

As I was waiting eagerly for judgement time, Kase-senpai—

—shouted loudly, looking utterly amazed.

“You got even worse! What is this!”

“Uu!””

I crashed onto the table at his overly harsh words.

Kase-senpai quickly got over his amazed state, and as if he was afraid, swallowed his spit.

“No, it’s safe to say that you’ve returned to your old playstyle. Your thirst for victory and your improvement from losses as well. That much I’ll recognize.”

“Uu—...”

“But, that’s why this is so confusing. Why do you...”

“...”

“Why do you make stupid plays that would make even a beginner surprised!? Whenever you get carried away, your face flushes red!”

“Oh.”

When Kase-senpai pointed that out, I couldn’t say anything and just hung my head.

“(Uu... that’s probably...)”

After my stroll with Amano-kun, I’ve been able to understand the joy of games once more, got my enthusiasm and joy for games again. That much is good. But...

“(Why... Why do I always think of Amano-kun’s face, who plays games for fun!? This is really strange, me! Is there a bug in my brain!?)”

This was the current reason for my bad performance.

“Uu...”

I groaned and glared at the monitor with teary eyes, having set a new low score.

I slowly thought over the events that happened recently.

And then—I came to a conclusion, and shouted with all my might in my head.

“(As I thought, this is Amano-kun’s faaaaauuuuuuuuuulllllllllllltttttttttt!)”

—The day when Tendo Karen returns to her normal condition in the truest sense was still a ways away.

Notes and References

1. [↑] Reference to Golden Mozaic.
2. [↑] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medal_game
3. [↑] This sentence really confused me, as bingo and sugoroku really shouldn't have any connection to pusher games. However, it may be referring to them as elements of luck/RNG.

Chapter 6

Gamers and Flying Get [\[1\]](#)

“Sorry, but I just want to be good friends.”

“Eh~, what the hell, mou!”

When my third confession failed, I looked up and threw a tantrum. Even though I was rejected, my reaction was excessive, stubborn, and rude... but it's nothing to be worried about.

After all, the person I was confessing to was a 2D heroine inside of a monitor.

...Don't tell me that this is really pathetic. I'm aware of it myself; after all, I'm sitting here by myself, cursing at a dating sim because I don't know what to do.

But even though I'm aware of it, I can't stop shouting at the screen.

“What's so bad about me...”

Collapsing on my bed face up, I mumbled like a snobby secondary character as I vacantly gazed at the controller that dropped from my hand.

It's been five days... since I started the dating sim “Golden Tricks”. As for my progress, I've captured one heroine a day. I waited until the time was right to start capturing the last heroine, which was my favorite. However, the result of the three confessions to the blond honors student, Frau Heavenly, was... [\[2\]](#)

I groaned while I scratched my head and pulled on my hair in frustration.

“Ah~, mou, I don't get it.. I have no idea where I made the wrong choice.”

In the beginning, my goals was to capture last heroine in one go without any mistakes. But... I made a mistake sometime, and my confession scene failed.

In my surprise, I thought about the choices I made and tried to figure out where I failed. In my second attempt, where I meticulously thought over my choices and was careful about what I said... I was rejected again.

When things got to that point, I realized that I was making some fundamental mistake, and I over-enthusiastically challenged it for the third time. Using the quick save and load function, I closely examined all of Frau's reactions from each of the possible choices and intentionally tried my best to stay away from all the other heroines. My perfect confession—was a tragic shipwreck.

I threw myself onto the bed while badmouthing the game.

As the strangely melancholic and simplistic ending credits of the bad end rolled, I let out a big sigh.

"(...Why did things turn out like this... Of all people, why am I only bad at this character...)"

While looking up at the ceiling, I got mad at myself, Amano Keita, for being in this miserable state. It may appear over-the-top for a simple dating sim game, but...

To be honest, Frau looked similar to Tendo-san.

"(...After leaving the heroine that looks like Tendo-san for last, I was tragically rejected...)"

Actually, none of the reviews and the rumors say that Frau's route was difficult in any sense. In other words, none of the other players had any difficulties clearing her route. I was the only person stuck. I don't understand how a woman's heart works at all. ...No, that's wrong. Rather than "a woman's heart", "Tendo-san's heart" would be more accurate. After all, I was able to capture the other heroines without any problems.

Even in this situation, the fact that I had to look up information on the last heroine is irritating. Having said that, going through the game once again takes 40 minutes, even if I skip through all the dialogue. I don't have a strategy in mind, nor do I have the energy to go through the game a fourth time.

"...Hah."

I let out a big sigh and turned off the console.

Feeling dead tired, I stayed on my bed and started playing a social network game.

“Amano, don’t call this a love consultation.”

When my curt friend responded like that, I clung onto him in a panic saying “no no no” and held him back.

It was after school on Wednesday. When I went to go spend my time doing nonsense, or in other words, go to the Gamers Hobby Club, I gathered up my courage and went to Uehara-kun for consultation, but his response was really cold.

After making sure that I had time before Chiaki comes, who was in another class, I kept trying to get him to talk to me.

“I’m not here for anything like that. I-I think this’ll help me get closer to Tendo-san. Please?”

Uehara-kun ignored me, who was desperately clinging onto him, and casually picked at his ear with his pinky.

“I mean, since you have a real girlfriend, Uehara-kun, capturing a heroine in a dating sim should be a piece of cake, right? Please teach me nicely, Uehara-kun.”

“...Amano.”

“Yes?”

Uehara-kun suddenly let out a big sigh and shook his finger while saying, “Oh my”... He then crossed his arms and started to talk like he was about to criticize me.

“I’m going to tell you the shocking truth starting now, which may be a bit of a surprise for an otaku like you.”

I sensed that he would say some harsh words, so I looked away and tried to stop him in a panic.

“Oh... S-sorry, you really don’t have to help! I don’t want to hear!”

“A dating sim game—”

“Ah, ah, ah, I-I can’t hear you—”

“—doesn’t actually simulate real life dating!”

“Don’t say it!”

Having been stabbed by the harsh truth, the herbivorous young boy trembled.

Uehara-kun looked down at me with a pitiful gaze as he continued to talk.

“So, even though I have a girlfriend—Rather, because I have a girlfriend, I can’t give you advice about dating sims. Even though they look similar... they’re two completely different things!”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaa!”

When Uehara-kun told me what I had been suspecting, I put my head on my desk, feeling crestfallen....

...I then groaned.

“Then... then, all the experience I’ve gotten from the game about talking to girls is...”

“Sorry, Amano. Actually, the experience you got is only for your interaction level with the heroines... in reality, your interaction level with girls hasn’t increased at all!”

“W-what!?”

“The opposite is also true. So, I’m not able to give you advice. You’re probably way better at dating sims than I am. Yo, Simulation God!”

“What kind of disgraceful nickname is ‘Simulation God’!? I-I’m not a ‘Simulation God’!”

“By the way, Amano, how many gal games have you completed just during your second year?”

“Um... around 40?”

“Congratulations, Amano.”

Suddenly, Uehara-kun handed me a sheet of paper. In big letters, the words “Simulation God” were written in huge letters with a sharpie. It’s something like a certificate.

After Uehara-kun saw me slump my shoulders, he said “Well, it’s just a joke”, and continued talking.

“Actually though, I don’t know even if you ask me. I don’t do those kind of gal games.”

“Y-you’re kidding. Don’t be shy and just say it honestly—”

“No, I’m serious. Really. Or rather, it’s just Amano-kun. A normal boy wouldn’t play gal games at all. Your sense of values are clearly biased because of your otaku nature.”

“T-then where do normal boys vent their feelings of desire for girls—”

“Normally, it’s AVs.”

Although I felt dazed momentarily, I regained my wits and let out a sad sigh in disappointment.

“...What is with the youth of Japan these days...”

“No no no, that’s what I should be saying to you.”

“It would be better if it was an eroge...”

“No, it’s your tastes that are strange. Simply speaking, you’re different. In a sense, your preferences are hardcore.”

After talking like he was amazed, Uehara-kun cleared his throat and returned to the main point.

“In the first place, why are you being so stubborn, Amano? If you’re coming to me for advice, just ask online first.”

It was a reasonable opinion, but I said, “No,” while I scratched my cheek in embarrassment.

“This kind of adventure... especially for things like heroines of dating sims, feels a lot more empathetic to make my own decisions while looking over the choices instead of following a guide...”

“Hoho, so in other words, you want to learn how to become friends with Tendo-san by yourself. What a man.”

My heart jumped up when he got it exactly right. I tried to deny it in a panic.

“N-no, what are you saying!? I’m talking about the game, the game!”

While trying to smooth over the situation, I reflected on my actions. I realized that I had superimposed reality onto games more than necessary, and that I had dug myself into a hole that I couldn’t get out of.

I let out a sigh, thinking about how this whole situation was pathetic. Looking bothered, Uehara-kun scratched his head and started to talk again.

“If you feel troubled about trying to use your experience capturing heroines in real life, just worry about reality itself. That would work much better.”

“? What do you mean?”

“I mean. ...Isn’t it about time that you approach Tendo herself?”

“Eh...”

My eyes spun at Uehara-kun’s suggestion.

“What are you saying, Uehara-kun? Right now, I’m less than a flea to Tendo-san, so if I were to go up to her now... I still need to learn how to talk to girls. Did you forget?”

“I didn’t forget. I’m telling you this because I didn’t forget.”

“What do you mean?”

“...What do I mean? ...Hah. You...”

“Hmm?”

Uehara-kun looked at me with an expression that seemed to say, “How did you not realize yet?”

And then... he approached the crux of the matter.

“Don’t you already talk to Tendo rather normally compared to other girls?”

“—Eh?”

I froze for an instant, thinking about what he said. During that pause, Uehara-kun continued to talk.

"Well, Hoshinomori goes without saying... and I don't really know much, but I've seen you talking to Aguri. And then... I mean, you talked to Tendo when you guys met and went to play medal games, right?"

"Y-yea, we did go play medal games together, but..."

What is Uehara-kun trying to say? For a mob character like me to talk to Tendo-san normally... wait... ...

"Comparatively!?"

"You just noticed!?"

I stood up from my chair with a clang and shouted, eyes wide. Uehara-kun also replied in surprise.

I-I guess that's true. When we were playing medal games, I was nervous as always and experienced strong feelings of awe, but I feel like I was able to properly communicate. Well, though that may be true, the mood wasn't very good. Eventually, it became a competition between the two of us. In other words, I ended up losing and showed her my disgraceful side. Yea.

I was going to tell him that, but Uehara-kun said "No, that's not what I meant", and listlessly massaged the back of his neck.

"I wasn't talking about winning or losing. Because you two played together without special reasons like 'club activities', I think you have already fulfilled the requirements to be considered as 'friends' now."

"U-umm, is that so?"

Honestly speaking, I've never thought about how close I am to Tendo-san. Every time we meet, I only think about my temper or about how I should act.

Since we're pretty much "acquaintances", I've always talked and acted like such, but... well, it's not like there's anything more than that between us. Rather, I often think that she still hates me.

Also, the reason why Tendo-san is getting close to me is... probably because she wants to get closer to Uehara-kun.

She's employing the tactic of "If you want to aim for the general, aim for his horse first" to get closer to him and be able to communicate with him. How

much can you consider this as “becoming closer”?

However, I can’t talk about this things with Uehara-kun himself, so all he sees is that Tendo-san and I are getting along.

“(Mou, this is why the protagonist of a love comedy that doesn’t understand the girl’s heart is...!)”

While I was groaning, Uehara-kun looked at me with an exasperated expression for some reason.

“...Is the hurdle of ‘friendship’ too big for you?”

“Uu...”

Leaving aside Tendo-san’s love, there might be some truth to his words. There might be, but...

“But the other person is Tendo-san, you know?”

“Whether it’s Tendo or a princess, in the end, it’s just another person.”

“But I’m like a small flea to Tendo-san, or rather, just a big slug...”

“Even if that might have been the case when you rejected her invitation to the Gamers Club, I don’t think it’s still like that. You know, Tendo doesn’t really hate you. If she hated you, would she invite you for a walk?”

“Since she met an acquaintance by chance on the street, she probably invited me out of kindness.”

For some reason, Uehara-kun said, “Are you serious...” and held his head. It seems like Uehara-kun was really always worried about my relationships with other people...

“...I’m really happy that Uehara-kun became my friend.”

“Why do you only say nice things to me!?”

He took a few steps back, his face turning red. Right... friendship between men should be more manly, yea. Manly... friendship between males... ...

“Uehara-kun, do you want to enter a bath with me?”

“Are you serious!? You’re not being serious, right!?”

Uehara-kun pushed aside the chairs and desks in front of him as he scrambled to get away from me. Our classmates that were still in the classroom were all looking at us.

As I looked around the room and bowed apologetically to try to fix the situation—

“Oh, uh, Chiaki?”

—I called to the seaweed-haired girl, who was, surprisingly, standing at the entrance of the classroom.

Uehara-kun's eyes widened in shock. For some reason, Chiaki's cheeks dyed red, and after looking back and forth at me and Uehara-kun...

"Um... that, that! I-I have something to take care of, so... um, um, that... goodbye—!"

She suddenly bolted from the room.

I didn't understand her reaction, so I tilted my head, confused. Uehara-kun, however, was opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish... Suddenly, not caring about his surroundings, he shouted out loud with all his might.

While I was surprised, he immediately rushed back to his seat, picked up his bag, told me “The Gamers Hobby Club is over for today!”, and rushed after Chiaki desperately.

I was still confused about the situation. When I could no longer hear Uehara-kun's footsteps in the hall, I finally realized what had just happened.

“Ah, damn...! This is definitely that...!”

Even if I may be oblivious about myself, I have some confidence in recognizing other people's relationships.

With a gulp, I rested my chin on my clasped hands and mumbled with conviction.

“This is a flag that Uehara-kun and Chiaki’s love is deepening...!”

A girl who blushes and run away, and a boy who shouts “I can’t let things end like this!” and chases after her. I can’t mistake this for anything else, Isn’t this definitely an decisive scene before the ending? Or rather, isn’t this a bad ending?

“Ah... mou, what should I do...!”

I pulled at my hair for a short while.

Even though I felt uneasy... I reluctantly decided to contact Aguri-san.

Tendo Karen

“So, no matter how many times you ask, I won’t go out with you. ...Huh? A trial period, is it? Honestly, outside of professional relationships, I find that way of thinking disgusting. ‘Trial’... don’t you think that’s rude to the other person?



"...No, I've already said this before. I don't want to date anyone. ...'Then isn't it fine'...? ...Hah. I'm shocked.

"Do you even understand what I'm saying? Just to make it clear, I'll tell you my final answer once again.

"I do not want to go out with you.

"...Hah? If you win the upcoming tournament? ...Hah. I don't understand someone like you.

"What do you think I am? Is it fun to look at people as an 'extra prize' at some tournament?

"It's great that you're good at boxing. I think it's respectable.

"But that's a completely different issue than my own emotions. Right?

"You want me to watch your game? You'll win for my sake? No thank you. Yes, no thank you. No, I don't dislike boxing. I am simply saying that as of now, I am not willing to sacrifice my personal time just to watch your match. After all, why would I spend my day off watching someone I barely know in a match?

"What? You want to... start by being friends?

"...No, I'm not sure about that. In the first place, what do you mean by "friends"? Since I didn't want to go out with you, you're trying to... get closer to me by any means possible, right?

"Unfortunately, I do not want to be that kind of friend.

"I'll say this honestly... I am fully aware that what I am about to say may be rude, since this is our first time meeting, but I will still be direct.

"Frankly speaking, I don't want to be friends with you.

"Our sense of values are different... or more importantly, I feel like we wouldn't click. Obviously, a friend doesn't have to have the same hobbies and preferences, but I think it's very important that their human nature is compatible.

"In that sense, and although it may be unfortunate, after having heard your confession, I do not think that I like your personality.

"So, taking all my earlier points into consideration, I—wait, what?"

I suddenly realized that Andou-san, who was in the boxing club from a different school, had disappeared from my vision.

"You're as unpleasant as the rumors said! Ah, no, please stop!"

While hurling insults, Andou san ran out of the cultural clubs building, the floorboards creaking with every step.

While sighing, I looked at his back until he disappeared from my sight. Suddenly, I felt someone pat my shoulders from behind.

"Good work, Tendo-san."

"? Oh, Misumi-kun. You're early."

Turning around in surprise, I looked at Misumi Eiichi-kun, who was standing still with an awkward and strained smile plastered on his ever refreshing face.

Noticing his expression and the nuance in his words, I asked him a question, feeling slightly ashamed.

"...Did you see?"

"Uh-huh. I felt guilty, but... in the corridor leading to the clubroom, it's pretty much unavoidable..."

"Yea, I guess. No, I should be the one sorry for blocking the hallway.

"Well, the only one waiting for the confession to end was me, so it's no big deal..."

Misumi-kun looked like he wanted to say something more as he scratched his cheek. When I asked him, "What's wrong?" and urged him to talk, he hesitated at first and then continued.

"Tendo-san, um... you turned him down pretty harshly..."

"Huh? Oh..."

I wryly smiled as I leaned against the wall of the hallway, trying to recover some of my depleted energy, and responded...

"I'm pretending to be a pro at love when I say this, but the worst thing you

can do is to give an ambiguous answer. If you reject them gently, they'll have a strange sense of hope and the situation will become even worse..."

That was the conclusion I got from my experience rejecting countless number of people.

Misumi-kun looked impressed as he crossed his arms and muttered.

"Haha, I see. You know, Tendo-san... even I would've cried a bit when you completely rejected him."

"Uu."

I was at a loss. ...I timidly asked him another question.

"Misumi-kun. Was I... really that harsh?"

Misumi-kun saw me looking uneasy and blinked in surprise.

"Eh? Yea, it was harsh, but... isn't that what you were trying to do?"

"I mean, that's true, but... ...I was wondering if I've been more aggressive than necessary when I refuse these daily confessions lately."

I was trying to be sincere to those who were sincere, and harsh to the ones who were superficial, but... it's a bit of a problem if the other party thinks it's overly harsh.

Misumi-kun went "Hmm..." while scratching back of the head, feeling uncomfortable. While thinking back on the confession that just happened, he started talking.

"Honestly, when I first saw him, I didn't think so highly of him, but..."

"R-right? He looked like someone without good sense."

Yes, I wasn't wrong. My response was definitely the right one—

"But even though your compatibility may be bad, I think he had good intentions. Since Tendo-san's reply was basically a complete rejection, he got a strong impression that you were like a demon."

"Ugu!?"

An arrow deeply stabbed my chest. ...C-certainly, that might be true. I didn't

want to date Andou-san at all, and I didn't really like his personality, but... but, he did come to confess with pure intentions.

On the other hand, even though I was being sincere, my words of rejection may have been overkill.

Misumi-kun lightly smiled and gave me some advice.

"Before, you might've gone in while thinking, 'Reject his confession', but this time, Tendo-san went in while basically thinking 'no', right?"

"Oh... when you say it like that, I guess that's true."

"Or rather, it seems like it's become a habit. You would 'walk in and reject his confession, then give him a reason', or some pattern like that."

"...Yea..."

Something came to mind. ...Oh, right. Ever since rejecting confessions became something ordinary, my thoughts unconsciously became "reject them from the beginning and keep things stable."

Misumi-kun still had a gentle smile on his face.

"I don't think it's very good to make too many habits. Even though you reject because of your original feelings, it seems like you're going in reverse."

"So you're saying that I start with the fact that I'm rejecting other people, then tell them my feelings as if I'm giving an excuse afterwards?"

"Yup, that's what I mean."

"That's certainly... an unfavorable thing to do as a person."

Lately, I... the person known as Tendo Karen, have been aware of that issue and could understand what he was talking about.

"(It's like the time when Amano-kun rejected my invitation to the Gamers Club... I can be really stubborn at times. I wonder if I'm just unable to adapt to the situation.)"

I've been arbitrarily deciding "because of this, this is probably true" for a lot of things.

Because Amano-kun likes games, he probably won't reject my invitation to

the Gamers Club.

Because he plays games for fun, he probably doesn't care about winning or losing.

Because I'm going to reject their confession, it's probably better for me to start off with a complete rejection.

I thought I looked perfect at a glance because of my resolute actions, but... rather, my flexibility was lost and I became unable to react to situations "...My shameful actions when Amano-kun refused my invitation to the club are a perfect example of this..."

Even now, my cheeks turn hot when I think back on that incident. Everything that happened was because of my stubbornness.

When I became depressed after having reflected on my past actions, Misumi-kun followed up in a panic.

"No, um, I wasn't saying that you should completely change how you live. Um, how should I put it... I was just saying that you should be aware of it..."

Misumi-kun stared off into space for a while, then looked like he hit upon a good idea.

"How about trying to increase your awareness?"

"Increase my awareness?"

"Yea. From my perspective, it seems like you always put on this facade of "the ideal Tendo Karen", for better or for worse. Well, during clubtime, it somewhat disappears."

"Ah..."

"Whenever you have a conversation, how about taking off that facade, then feel what the inner Tendo-san is thinking? I think doing things in that order would be better."

"In other words... first, talk with my true feelings in mind and then try to apologize afterwards... right?"

"Yea. In Tendo-san's case, I think that would be better."

“...I see.”

I put my hand under my chin while I thought over what he said and agreed with his words. However, Misumi-kun was muttering something at the same time.

“...If you don’t, you’ll never get closer to Amano-kun, no matter how much time passes...”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“No, it was nothing. ...If you couldn’t even hear that, then you definitely wouldn’t hear Amano-kun... Ah, it looks grim...”

Misumi-kun said something again, but I couldn’t hear what he said, so I guess it doesn’t have anything to do with me.

After having finished talking for now, we went to the clubroom and started playing our respective games. However...

“Start by being honest with my feelings. Be honest with my feelings. Be honest with my feelings. Don’t start with a rejection. Don’t start with a rejection. Don’t start with a rejection...”

I unconsciously repeated the same words over and over throughout all of club time.

Uehara Tasuku

“S-s-sorry, I seem to have jumped to a wrong conclusion...”

“Yea, completely wrong.”

I let out a sigh in exhaustion while standing next to the apologetic Hoshinomori.

We were walking side by side towards the downtown area, with the school building dyed by the rays of the setting sun behind us.

Hoshinomori usually took the bus in front of the building, but it looks like she has some shopping to do today. So, I walked with her and cleared up her BL suspicions, and thus we arrived at the current situation...

I stole a glance at the girl walking next to me and sighed in my mind.

“(...In the end, I’m walking with Hoshinomori again. How strange.)”

Usually, I would hang out with my girlfriend Aguri every day after school, but our relationship got strained a short while back.

That’s still how things are these days. As soon as I realized my love for Aguri, our time together rapidly decreased, and somehow I started spending more time Amano and Hoshinomori.

“(This can only be God’s harassment...)”

I’m not a devout person, but I can’t help but think that this foolish situation is someone’s foolish prank that is changing our fates.

“(And what does this god even want to do in the end? Even though the thread of destiny clearly links Amano and Hoshinomori, he’s still creating other opportunities between Amano and Tendo, as well as me and Hoshinomori.)”

Oh, and Amano and Aguri recently. ...What a complicated mess. What kind of youth report is this?^[3]

I noticed that my serious middle school self with his hair parted to the side

within me was looking at this and laughing through his nose. No, my middle school self. I know. I wish that a ghost shark would quickly come and attack these party people in this love web at a beach resort.

However, I want you to look at this situation again, my old self. You'll notice something right away.

All the characters in this love rectangle or whatever—none of them have had their first kiss yet.

If I said in the style of Kitano Takeshi's movies, it would be "Everybody, virgin". What is this, Miura Jun's world view? Ah, yes, yes, did you know that the word "virgin" originally applied to girls as well, my old self?^[4]

...Hey, don't look at me with those eyes, my middle school self. This is far from being a youth report or a high school report; don't say that this is on the level of a middle school student's diary. That'd be rude. ...to the middle schooler's diary.

Anyway, it's like we are currently mixed up in these really ridiculous, soap opera-like circumstances, and then producing relationships using love tips from something like "Sawayaka 3 kumi".^[5]

I put my hand to my forehead as I felt a headache coming. Hoshinomori noticed and looked at me in worry.

"U-uehara-san, are you alright? Are you sick or something...?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, it's nothing. It's just that... I was suddenly hit by the cruelty of this world."

"Oh, so you were being attacked by something after all."

Hoshinomori came to a conclusion by herself and nodded. I no longer have the strength to fix her misunderstandings.

The surroundings gradually became more busy as we headed towards downtown. Suddenly, I started talking about a topic that I've been thinking about for a while now.

"By the way, what do you think of Amano lately—"

"I wish he'd get on a Capcom helicopter already."^[6]

"Still want to kill him, huh."

Their fate seems to be in a direct retreat. Definitely not going well in any way.

As soon as I brought up the topic of Amano, her mood immediately became worse as she continued talking.

"I still can't understand how Keita has a super cute girlfriend like 'Aguri-san'."

"O-oh, I don't understand that either..."

In a different meaning from Hoshinomori, though. I tried to keep talking, but she went "Right!?", and took initiative of the conversation.

"This is really strange! Even now, when I remember Keita's useless, self-confident expression while he talked fondly about his love, I'm so irritated, irritated!"

"...I-is that so? ...H-hey, Hoshinomori. Are you sure you weren't misunderstanding..."

"It was the first time seeing a boy look so damn proud while talking about his girlfriend!"

"..."

"? Huh? What's wrong, Uehara-san? You don't look very good."

"No... it's nothing. Yea. ...Let's change the topic."

"Haa, well, it's fine, but..."

Hoshinomori replied, looking curious. I let out a big sigh, prepared my heart, and asked her another question, but from a different angle this time.

"Then, what do you think about Tendo?"

She replied while playing with the curly tips of her hair.

"Tendo-san? Hmm... What, you ask? We're classmates, but we never talk, so... well, if you were to compare us, I would be like a pile of trash..."

"Wow, even your self-awareness is the same."

"Um, but, I do respect her. Since we both like games, if she became my friend one day, even though that thought is more or less... but, that would be really

amazing! P-p-please forget what I just said!"

"...Go out with Amano already. Please. It's not even on the level of just being 'suitable'."

"? Um, how'd you reach that conclusion from this conversation?"

Hoshinomori tilted her neck, looking completely lost. "Well, is that so? I don't understand." I don't feel like explaining if she said that. No matter what I say right now, I know that it won't affect how these two view each other.

After walking in silence for a bit, it was Hoshinomori who spoke up first this time, though looking uneasy.

"U-uehara-san, what do you think? About... Tendo-san."

"Huh? My... impression of Tendo?"

I blinked in surprise from the unexpected question and repeated her question. Hoshinomori looked down in embarrassment, and nodded slightly. ... Well, I don't really see why she asked the question, but...

No, wait. Perhaps...

"(As a person who's close to Amano, is she asking because she unconsciously views Tendo as a rival?)"

Hoshinomori seems to have misunderstood Aguri as Amano's girlfriend for some reason (...haha, right?), but on the other hand, the radar of her mind must have perceived Tendo as the true rival.

If that's the case... There's only one response I can give.

I suddenly stopped, drawing Hoshinomori's attention.

I fearlessly smiled, and—with all my power, I will fan the flames of rivalry within her heart!

"I think Tendo Karen is the best girl there is. No boy can avoid falling in love with her!"

“As I thought, Uehara-san thinks that of Tendo-san...!”

Hoshinomori’s face became pale after receiving some kind of shock.

“(Oh, isn’t this a pretty good response? It’s proof that she’s aware of Amano.)”

After looking at her state and confirming my thoughts, I unintentionally let out a laugh.

“Fufu...”

“Ugh! That delightful smile on Uehara-san’s face... it’s... it’s my first time seeing such an expression...”

Hoshinomori was unsteady on her feet, which was a reaction somewhat beyond my expectations. Hey, isn’t that great? As I thought, she’s actually very conscious of Amano.

Feeling satisfied, I patted her head to cheer her up from her depressed state.



"Cheer up, Hoshinomori. If you ask me, you're a great girl. You won't lose to Tendo at all."

"Hah... but... Well, if Uehara-san is happy... wait, what!? Fuee!?"

Hoshinomori flushed a deep red from my words, and backed away in a panic. ...Oh, shit. Was it bad to carelessly touch the hair of a shy girl? No, when I thought to cheer up Hoshinomori, it seemed like she had a complex about her hair, so I touched her hair to reassure her...

"(Aguri's the type to cling onto me, so lately, my sense of distance with girls seems to have gotten a bit strange.)"

While I was reflecting on my actions, Hoshinomori's eyes started spinning around in circles, and her body temperature shot up, as if steam would start shooting out of her head at any moment. At last, it seemed like she reached her limit. She squeezed her bag, lowered her head, and...

"E-e-excuse me for today!"

"Ah, hey, wait—"

She dashed away even before I could stop her. ...Like Tendo, is it some kind of trend for beautiful girls to leave by dashing away? Something like Zenryoukuzaka.^[7]

"...Hah."

Feeling tired all of a sudden, I let out a sigh. I inadvertently turned around, and for the first time, I noticed that we were walking on the sidewalk right in front of a family restaurant.

"(Shit, was I seen by a customer?)"

No, far from just being seen, the customers sitting on the side facing the road would've probably heard the conversation. Even though I felt embarrassed from that possibility, I didn't have to worry about the part of the restaurant I glanced at. The table I saw had a glass and a cup of coffee, but there was no one sitting there. Did they already go home, or did they go to the drink bar...? Either way, it seems like our exchange wasn't seen.

I let out a sigh of relief. While thinking about what I should do from now on, I

quickly left the restaurant.

Amano Keita

“... ...D-did he leave? Hurry up, Amano-chi, look!”

“Wait, don’t rush me, Aguri-san!Oh, it looks like he left.”

I peaked out from under the seats to check that Uehara-kun was leaving, and put my hand over my chest in relief.

]Aguri-san also peeked out from under the table to look outside.

“...”

We absentmindedly kneeled on the floor of the family restaurant for a short while. ...And then.

“...D-dear customers?”

“Oh.”

When we heard the waitress’ cramped voice, we finally noticed how suspicious we looked. After sitting back on the seats in a panic, we looked at her with awkward smiles, as if to say, “There’s nothing to see here.”

“...P-please take your time—”

She was clearly suspicious of us. Trying to avoid getting involved with us as much as possible, the waitress quickly walked away from our table.

We kept smiling as we watched her leave... and when she disappeared into the kitchen, we both let out our breaths.

“Hah.”

We both collapsed onto the table. When my gaze incidentally rested on the coffee cup, I said, “Oh”.

“Was it fine... for our cups to be on the table?”

I talked while I was still collapsed on the table. Aguri-san replied, also in a similar position.

“Isn’t it fine as long as he didn’t see us?”

“Ah, I guess...”

We talked back and forth while looking at the ceiling, feeling out of it.

The reason being...

“(Uehara-kun is definitely cheatiiiiiiinnnnnnnnngggggg!)”

After all, enough proof of cheating just appeared right in front of our eyes.

“(Saying that Tendo is the best girl, then smoothly patting the head of another girl... Uehara-kun, you’re impossible...! If this were the KISUMAI BUSAIKU rankings, you have the potential to get first place every time!)”^[8]

I can’t even say anything anymore. I propped my head using my arm.

On the other hand, Aguri-san was still looking up at the ceiling, muttering something.



“Yuute imiya oukimu kouho riiyu ujitori yamaa kirape pepepepe pepepe
pepepepepepepepepepepepepepepe...”^[9]

“A spell of restoration!? Or rather, what generation are you from, Aguri-san!?”

“? What are you saying? Aguri was just mumbling the words that came from the bottom of my heart in this nothingness...”

“What are the chances of that!?”

A heaven-sent child of the gaming industry was sitting in front of me, naturally spewing out spells of restoration as a means of recovery from a shocked state. It's a miracle. But the sad part is that this person has absolutely no interest in games. It's a useless miracle.

As if it was the effect of the spell, Aguri-san finally returned to her normal state and started sipping her now lukewarm oolong tea.

“Haa... the scene we just came across is rather refreshing...”

“Yea, definitely. Rather than worrying about trusting or doubting others, it probably feels more relaxing.”

“Hey, can you not talk like you understand, you hikki otaku bocchi boy?”

“Yes, I'm sorry.”

I sat up in my seat. Lately, there's one that that I've learned about human relationships. That is, no matter how much time and effort you put in, there are some relationships where it is impossible to get close.

Having been influenced by RPGs, I mistakenly thought that spending long amounts of time together would help a group of people trust each other and become friends.

“Amano-chi, more juice.”

“Yes, right away. ...Um, which one?”

“...”

“Oh, right. This is a chance for me to show my sense by picking myself. Excuse me.”

—I feel like this power relationship will stay this way for my whole life. We'll never become lovers, close friends, or anything of the sort. This is the limit to how close we can get.

I went to the drink bar, got a mixed fruit juice drink, and put it down in front of Aguri-san after returning to our table.

“Mixed juice, huh. ...And your reasoning?”

“I thought you'd like something bittersweet.”

“12 points.”

“So low!?”

“Feelings don't always match with what someone wants to drink; that's what a maiden's heart is—”

While talking, Aguri-san started to drink her mixed juice through the straw. As I sat down, I asked her a question.

“Then what was the correct answer?”

“A short caramel macchiato from Starb*cks.”

“That's an unreasonable demand!”

“Your inability to think of such things is related to why you're bad at games, Amano-chi.”

“Don't talk like you know about games, you riajuu girl!”

I also get mad if you say something like that! However, Aguri-san completely ignored my words and looked out the window as she kept sucking on her straw.

I let out a sigh, then realized that I didn't get my own drink. Reluctantly, I drank my coffee that had become cold. The bitter taste was strong, but it strangely matched how I was feeling right now.

Both of us looked out the window in silence for a while... then, Aguri-san started to talk as if she was talking to herself.

“Even then, Aguri loves Tasuku.”

“...”

I didn't say anything and sipped my coffee again. ...It's really bitter.

"...What should I do..."

"What should I do, huh."

I bitterly smiled and repeated Aguri-san's words. ...As a loner, I didn't think that love troubles were so worrisome.

Especially the fact that the simplest solution of "Throwing away your feelings" is the worst idea.

It would be better if Uehara-kun was a hopeless boy...

I let out a sigh and started to talk.

"I'm not trying to stick up for a friend, but... I don't think that Uehara-kun doesn't mean anything bad, you know? He wouldn't ever try to hurt Aguri-san."

"That goes without saying, Amano-chi."

Aguri-san laughed and talked proudly.

"Tasuku is really good at taking care of people. That's why Aguri came to like him... He also attracts other rivals like Amano-chi."

"I see you counted me as one of Uehara-kun's heroines without hesitation."

"Eh, am I wrong, then?."

"... ... I'm sorry, it terrifies me that I couldn't deny it immediately."

Uehara-kun might be stolen away! If Uehara-kun makes another gaming friend, I'm certain that I would say "Kii—! Who is it!?". I now recognize that I have some of those feelings against Chiaki. That seaweed girl is a beast. She's going to steal my position as his "well-informed game buddy".

"Amano-chi, Amano-chi, don't bite your nails with such a terrifying expression."

"Ha! Sorry, Aguri-san. What were we talking about? Were we talking about my top 1000 picks for game music?"

"We weren't talking about that, I have no interest in it, and never bring it up again for all of eternity."

“I thought we were talking about where to rank Chrono Cross...”

“We weren’t.”

“Personally, I want to include all the songs from Final F*ntasy 13...”

“Amano-chi, Amano-chi, can I say something?”

“What is it, Aguri-san. I won’t stop talking about games so easily! The only thing that can dampen my passion for games is something appropriately—”

“Gross.”

I fell silent as my heart shattered from those five letters. Even an apology doesn’t come out. I stayed silent, my hands shaking. I felt like crying.

Suddenly, a group of 6 middle schoolers sat down at the table nearby, their voices audible from where we were sitting. There were three boys and three girls. A boy, whose uniform didn’t really suit him, stood up and told a joke. The girls laughed at his joke, saying “Stop that, you~”.

“...”

“Amano-chi, Amano-chi, don’t make such a gloomy expression.”

“Eh, was I?”

“Yea, yea. Your expression was full of NEET-like hatred and envy.”

“NEET-like is too much, but... well, I certainly did have some negative emotions there. Sorry. I was just wishing that those students who came to a family restaurant with girls would explode.”

“Amano-chi, your true feelings are leaking out. But I mean, you are at a family restaurant with a cute girl right now.”

“Eh...”

“Eh, why are you making such an annoyed look? I’m the one that’s annoyed.”

Aguri-san glared at me in dissatisfaction. I thought for a bit and replied.

“No, sorry. Somehow, the ‘family restaurant riajuu’ is so different than what I had imagined.”

“What is this new term, ‘family restaurant riajuu’?”

"Just as it sounds like. I use it mainly for middle to high school students who frolic around in family restaurants."

"Wait. Amano-chi, have you never gone to a family restaurant with a friend other than Aguri..."

"..."

"I'm somewhat sorry."

She somewhat apologized. I let out a sigh and continued talking.

"Well, I am somewhat jealous that these boys and girls are laughing and having fun, but more importantly, I always think, 'do they even have enough spare cash to spend at family restaurants?' or 'just go eat at home' and feel hatred for these students who come to eat at family restaurants."

"Aren't you being excessively nitpicky!?"

"I've never thought that my thoughts were 'excessively nitpicky' in my whole life."

"No, but you're talking with a cute girl at a family restaurant right now."

"..."

"Like I said, why are you making such an annoyed expression? I'm the one that's annoyed!"

Aguri-san then glanced at the group of middle school students and sighed as she went "Well..."

"Aguri understand what Amano-chi is saying, though. Actually, Aguri was also kind of like Amano-chi back in middle school."

"Right!"

"But not all students who go to family restaurants are like what Amano-chi thinks. For example, look at that girl at the end of that seat."

I reluctantly turned towards the middle school students that Aguri-san was pointing at. As I glanced over in that direction, I saw a plain girl who was awkwardly smiling.

"For example, that girl is similar to Amano-chi, if anything. But unlike Amano-

chi, she is able to go along with the flow, and she can be one of the ‘family restaurant riajuu’ that you talk of. The amount of effort she put in is amazing. Then, Amano-chi, do you think someone like her should also go explode?”

“That’s...”

Aguri-san smiled as I struggled to reply.

“The Amano-chi right now and that girl are similar. There are a lot of things in the world you can’t understand just by glancing at the situation.”

“Aguri-san...”

I teared up, feeling moved from her unexpected adult-like behavior.

However...

“Wow~! Look, look, it’s a belly button... it’s so risque!”

“Stop, you’re the worst, hahaha.”

“I really think they should go explode!”

I hit the table when I saw the middle school students finally take off their clothes in high spirits!

“Amano-chi, Amano-chi, you’re too loud!”

“Look, Aguri-san! The ‘plain girl’ you were talking about is completely the opposite! Look! She’s poking his belly button without any restraint! Kii—!”

“Ok, ok Amano-chi! Aguri understands, so stop making matters worse!”

“I’m not making matters worse! I’m right! Absolutely right!”

“That’s what I mean by making things worse!”

Aguri-san tried to calm me down as I flared up in anger.

And then, while roughly breathing, I was about to sit down, having somewhat calmed down...

“Ahaha.”

Aguri-san let out a laugh, looking like she was enjoying herself.

She laughed by herself for a bit while I still felt envious of those middle school students.

While wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, she continued to talk.

“Thanks, Amano-chi.”

“W-what are you talking about?”

Feeling slightly startled, I averted my gaze. However, Aguri-san continued to talk as if she saw through everything.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Is that so?”

“Yea.”

We both looked out the window as we conversed.

I wonder what she realized. Looking refreshed, Aguri-san suddenly said “Ok then!” in a loud voice.

“Leaving aside Aguri and Tasuku, how about her, Amano-chi?”

“Her?”

“You’ve resolved yourself, right? About Tendo-san.”

“...”

I started to sweat and averted my eyes without answering the question. Aguri-san let out a sigh on purpose.

“...Amano-chi, don’t you have any motivation? Shouldn’t you be taking action?”

“Even if you say that...”

Feeling down, I glanced at Aguri-san. For some reason, she looked seriously angry. ...I think that this part of her is really similar to Uehara-kun. Suddenly, I wondered if this was how it would feel to be helped for a marriage interview by an old, married couple— “Amano-chi, are you thinking of something rude right now?”

"Of course not. I was just thinking about how Aguri-san is nice for helping out."

"I see. Then, Amano-chi, you should go make a move on Tendo-san soon."

"I take back my words. You're a demon."

I then wondered if this was how it would feel to be pestered by an annoying relative that was trying to persuade me to do a marriage interview.

Aguri-san shrugged her shoulders and continued.

"Amano-chi. Aguri was originally a really plain girl, but I changed myself with great effort. In the end, I was able to go on the attack against Tasuku and reached this point, you know?"

"So you're at this point after your boyfriend practically cheated on you, I see __"

She pinched my cheeks with all her strength. It wasn't like one of those gentle, love comedy-like pinches on the cheek; it was strong enough to have left a mark. Scary. Girls are scary.

As I rubbed my cheek with tears in my eyes, Aguri-san glared at me.

"In other words, just because you put in the effort to improve yourself doesn't mean anything will change!"

"No, but you can raise flags with heroines just by raising your parameters in Tokimeki Memorial..."

"Amano-chi. Just think about it. A girl who gets closer to a boy as soon as his looks or his parameters improve... Amano-chi, what would you think of her?"

"At the very least, I wouldn't want to be her friend."

"Then, from your point of view, is Tendo-san someone like that?"

"Definitely not!"

I strongly hit the table. Aguri-san continued, looking somewhat taken aback.

"Then you understand, don't you? Regardless of how much you improve yourself, if you don't talk to Tendo-san, nothing will come of your efforts in the end."

“I get what you’re saying, but...”

If I don’t talk to Tendo-san, I probably won’t be able to get closer to her.

Even then, I... feel like I’ve gotten better at talking to other people lately (at least, enough to stop my rehab), but does that mean I can talk to the most popular girl in Otobuki High School?

In other words, isn’t it the same thing as trying to challenge the last boss like a hero after feeling satisfied by becoming level 3 from defeating slimes?

As I was about to say my doubts out loud, Aguri-san crossed her arms and sighed.

“Amano-chi, what level do you feel like you should be?”

“Huh? That’s... well... about level 60?”

“Then, when do you think you’ll reach that stage at the rate you’re progressing at?”

“...”

I couldn’t say anything. Certainly, If I waited until then, my high school life would have ended.

With a somewhat sympathetic gaze, Aguri-san continued to speak.

“You know, Amano-chi, life isn’t a game.”

“I agree. Even then, I think that games are an amazing, fun representation of life—”

“You’re too loud, shut up.”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

“Amano-chi. Are relationships between two people defined by things like what ‘level’ they are? After earning ‘good points’ with someone, it doesn’t mean that they automatically become your friend starting from that point in time.”

I was startled. Aguri-san is sharp in these areas. Even though Uehara-kun jokes around that she’s a “stupid girl”, she does her best to enjoy the real world, unlike me... She really understands the truly important parts.

“Amano-chi. In this world, 1 plus 1 doesn’t equal 2.”

“Yes.”

I replied seriously to Aguri-san, who also spoke with an earnest gaze.

After a pause, Relationship Master Aguri-san made a declaration as I waited for her next words.

“1 plus 1 is... love!”

In that moment, the serious atmosphere of our conversation instantly vanished.

“...Hah... love?”

“It’s love!”

...I guess what Uehara-kun said is true. I mean... I don’t know what she meant by those words, but it felt quite lacking. She’s kind of slow.

Also, her words have some kind strange indecency to them. 1 plus 1 is love. ... It sounds like one of those sayings that you keep saying because they sound wise, but are actually pretty stupid when you think about it.

I made a vague smile so as not to dampen her spirits since she looked really proud.

Aguri-san nodded and continued by herself.

“Unlike games, lovers don’t just pop out of nowhere.”

“I’m taking you at your word, Aguri-san, but that doesn’t happen in games either...”

“Shut up! That’s not the point here! Amano-chi, you have to do something!”

“No, in the first place, I just want to be friends with Tendo-san... no, I just want to be recognized by her...”

“Same thing. No matter what your goal is, you have to talk to her or else nothing’s going to happen.”

“...Yes, but...”

I hung my head, feeling restless. Actually, I’m completely aware of my own

cowardice and my indecisiveness. I know, but... it's still scary for me to try, knowing that I'll fail. It's like saying, "Alright, let's climb Mount Everest!" after buying a light down jacket from Un*qlo. That's what I'm trying to do just because I got the chance to talk to her a bit. There's so much risk involved.

Nonetheless, our conversation was going in circles. Aguri-san didn't look like she was going to give in anytime soon.

As a last resort, I changed the topic.

"Um, Aguri-san, how did you confess to Uehara-kun?"

"Eh? You're asking that? You want to hear about that? Wow. Um..."

"(Oh, dear.)"

When I saw Aguri-san bashfully playing with the tips of her hair and clearly about to launch into a long speech and talk fondly about her confession, I felt weary.

After about 30 minutes of introduction, she finally reached the confession scene.

I returned to reality and paid attention to her story, having ended my game of 'mental tetris'.

"And then, Aguri mustered up all of her courage, called out Tasuku, and said this!"

Aguri-san said with a boastful expression.

"Uehara-kun, please go out with me."

"...Heh?"

I accidentally let out a tiny voice. Aguri-san interpreted that as "I didn't hear you" and said it again.

"I said, 'Uehara-kun, please go out with me', Amano-chi."

"...That's... really?"

After talking on and on about Uehara-kun, her simple confession was anticlimactic. I was dumbfounded.

However, Aguri-san just nodded to my question and continued talking.

"Well, I heard that Tasuku liked less serious girls. But, even if that wasn't the case I probably would've said the same thing."

"Isn't that way too simple for such an important confession—"

"It's the opposite, Amano-chi."

"Huh?"

Aguri-san smiled maturely unlike her age.

"The most important things are the most simple, and so they come out naturally."

"..."

I didn't say anything. Aguri-san continued in an unusually kind tone.

"That's why, Amano-chi, if you really want to become friends with Tendo-san, or to become closer... your honest feelings should naturally come out without forcing it."

"...Is... is that so?"

I've always made Tendo-san angry. But perhaps, I might not be so hopeless... unlike Aguri-san, I might have been trying too hard to get rid of all good will towards me.

"Aguri-san, I..."

I gripped my empty cup with both hands and drank the remaining bitter liquid that was left in the bottom of the cup.

With determination, I made a declaration to Aguri-san, my friend that I respect.

"Tomorrow, I'll challenge Tendo-san, even if I fail!"

Tendo Karen

On my way back home from club, I thought over the advice that Misumi-kun gave me.

“Don’t start with a rejection, be honest with my feelings first...”

Usually, it wouldn’t be such a difficult thing, but ever since I was young, I’ve learned to act in a manner like my outward appearance, rather than acting on my true feelings.

“(However, after having resolved myself, I, Tendo Karen, will completely follow through with my decision.)”

Even if other girls might go back on their word, Tendo Karen will never do the same.

“Don’t start with a rejection. Reply with my honest feelings...”

As I walked down the street while muttering the same lines over and over again, I lightly bumped shoulders with another girl walking in the opposite direction who was clearly not paying attention to her surroundings.

The somewhat flashy student noticed just before she bumped into me and tried to avoid me, but to no avail. She lightly apologized.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Oh, no, it was my fault...”

After saying that much, I suddenly realized something, and tried again.

“Yes, it was a bother. Please try not to take up the whole sidewalk as you walk.”

“Huh!? Oh, o-okay...”

She stopped from my unexpectedly harsh words. It looked like things would take a turn for the worse.

“I’m very sorry for my rude words. Well then, goodbye.”

I lowered my head in apology, smiled, turned around, and gallantly walked away.

After walking for a short while... I fist-pumped, feeling like I had accomplished something.

“(Perfect!)”

This is definitely what Misumi-kun was trying to say. I spoke my true feelings, then covered it up. Honestly, this feels unexpectedly nice.

“(I’m in great condition. I didn’t start off with saying ‘no’ immediately, and instead started by speaking my true feelings and following up afterwards. This is it. This is it!)”

While letting out my breath, I pushed my bangs to the side and smiled in satisfaction. As I thought, I have a strong will. I think that’s one of my strong points. It’s probably because I’m an actor’s daughter. After all, I would always set my mind on achieving something, and I would always become that idealized image I had in mind.

It’s the same thing this time. I decided to “start with my true feelings”, and on the very same day, I achieved my goal. My ability is amazing, even to me.

Feeling confident, I stopped my self-reform, and looked in front of me as I kept walking. Before I noticed, I had reached the downtown area.

Since I’m here anyway, shall I visit the game shop? As I pondered over whether or not I should go...

“(That’s...)”

I saw a girl with disheveled hair running in my direction. Although I was startled for a moment, as she gradually got closer, I noticed that the student was one of my classmates. Right before she was about to run past me, I called out to the panicked girl.

“Hoshinomori-san?”

“...!?”

She pulled a short distance past me, suddenly stopped, and turned around to look at me.

“Te... Tendo-san?”

She was tightly squeezing her bag to her chest as she panted from running.

Honestly, I didn’t have much in common with her, so after some hesitation about what to say, I decided to start with a harmless greeting— “(Hah!? That’s bad, Tendo Karen! Start with my honest feelings! Yea!)”

Noticing my close call, I called out to the panting girl with a smile.

“For a moment, I thought that seaweed could fly.”

“A direct hit!?”

“Oh, but not in a bad way, of course.”

“And then a really messy follow up! What is this!? What the hell is this!?”

Hoshinomori started tearing up all of a sudden. ...How strange. Did I do anything wrong...

I cleared my throat and tried to fix the situation with a smile.

“Sorry, I called out to you just because I recognized your face.”

“Huh? Ah, y-yes, um, this, is an honor, for you to talk to someone like me...”

For some reason, Hoshinomori-san played with the tips of her hair as if she was nervous.

While keeping Misumi-kun’s advice in mind, I continued the conversation.

“But I honestly don’t really know anything about Hoshinomori-san, so I don’t know what to talk about.”

“That’s what you say!? You talked to me to say that!? I-I guess it’s true, but...”

“Of course, I don’t mean anything bad by that.”

“Um, you know, that follow-up doesn’t work every time!”

I see, is that so? That’s not good. I’ve pretty much removed how to speak honestly from my consciousness, so my follow up is pretty sloppy. Focus, Tendo Karen.

...Alright.

"Hoshinomori-san, you're beautiful, have great style, and have such fair skin —how wonderful!"

"Such a sudden backhanded compliment! I-Is this some new way of bullying me!?"

Strange. Hoshinomori-san is trembling. I thought my praise was just perfect, but... I wonder what the reason Hoshinomori-san's unexpected reaction... there's one thing that comes to mind.

"Ufufu. Hoshinomori-san, you've changed."

"Eeeeeeeehhhhhhh!?"

She had a somewhat upset expression. Yup, Hoshinomori-san definitely changed. However, we aren't communicating properly right now.

There's also no point in continuing this useless conversation. I thought about what topic she would want to hear about the most, and talked about that.

"How is it with Amano-kun lately?"

"Huh?"

Hoshinomori-san tilted her neck in confusion. I continued to talk with a friendly grin.

"I'm talking about your relationship with Amano-kun. Did you make any progress?"

"Ha-hah. ... Um... I, I don't know what Tendo-san is trying to ask..."

"You're such a vague person! I don't know either!"

"Eeeeeeeeeehhhhhhhhh!?"

"I just wanted to ask one thing. That is, how are things with Amano-kun?"

"H-how, you say... well, the same as ever, but..."

She replied hesitantly.

"...The same, is it..."

I thought back on the time I visited the Gamers Hobby Club. Certainly,

Amano-kun and Hoshinomori-san were close enough to call each other by their first names, but I only saw them have a lover's quarrel...

"...Lucky."

"What!? Tendo-san!? Are you feeling envious for some reason!?"

When I muttered my true thoughts, Hoshinomori-san shot another unexpected tsukkomi once again. ...Her tsukkomis and reactions are more severe than her usual, quiet self. She's similar to Amano-kun in that aspect. Similar... to Amano-kun... Similar...

"...Unfair..."

"Like I said, what is it!? Tendo-san!? Why are you suddenly pouting!?"

Hoshinomori-san kept fidgeting with her fingers, looking more and more frantic as she kept asking questions.

...This is bad. I feel like I've been too honest about my feelings.

I took a few quick deep breaths in succession, and put on the Tendo Karen facade once again.

"Fufu, it'll be fun seeing how long this Gamers Hobby Club will last!"

"So suddenly!? Why the sudden ojou-sama-like rival character!? Tendo-san!?"

"Sorry, I made a mistake. Ahem. ...Oh, how nice to see you, Hoshinomori-san."

"Such a quick change!? W-well, this is certainly how Tendo-san always acts, but..."

Somehow, it seems that my appearance was successful. I started the conversation once again.

"Then, Hoshinomori-san. Has the Gamers Hobby Club ended for today?"

"Eh? Ah, um, talking about that, um, in the first place, today's meeting was a complete failure..."

"? What do you mean?"

Right then, a middle-aged office worker walked past us as he said, "Excuse

me.” I noticed that we were talking right in the middle of the sidewalk. After I said “Sorry” to the man, we started to talk as we walked.

She apparently also had some business in the downtown area. But then why was she running away in the opposite direction earlier? When I asked, her cheeks turned red as she explained the general outline of what had happened.

After she finished telling her story, I crossed my arms and let out a big sigh.

“Good grief, even Uehara-kun is hopeless.”

I always thought he was an easy person, but I didn’t think he went for anyone and anything.

However, as I was evaluating his character, Hoshinomori-san quickly followed up in a panic.

“Uehara-kun is a very nice person! There’s nothing hopeless about him!”

“Hmm, is that so? However, I do hear that he talks to a lot of girls...”



“? Really? But, um, it’s not like he actually has a girlfriend, so I don’t think there are any problems...”

I hesitated a little from Hoshinomori-san’s words.

“That’s... my memory is vague so I may not be correct, but I heard that he did have a girlfriend...”

“Eh, i-i-is that so?”

“Yea. I heard that it was that Aguri-san...”

“Huh?”

Hoshinomori-san’s eyes spun from my words. She gulped.

In the next moment—she held her stomach as she laughed.

“Ahahahaha, Tendo-san, that’s definitely wrong! Aguri-san is Keita’s girlfriend! She has nothing to do with Uehara-san!”

“But I heard from other people that...”

“Ah, I’m definitely sure that Aguri-san is Keita’s girlfriend! I mean, we’ve talked about his girlfriend together too, even though it’s a painful experience because I’m a loner! Really!”

Considering that it was a guess, Hoshinomori-san spoke with great conviction. I was overawed by her certainty.

“(T-that’s possible. They must have had the opportunity to talk about each other’s partners...)”

However, to be frank, I really can’t see Amano-kun and Aguri-san dating. She fits much better with Uehara-kun. However...

“(P-perhaps I just want to avert my eyes from the truth that Amano-kun is dating someone...!)”

Hoshinomori-san, in a strangely good mood, continued to talk as I held my head in my hands.

“Ehehehe, I was surprised that you said that Uehara-san was dating someone. Tendo-san, having those kind of misunderstandings is an unexpected side of you.”

“U-uu!?”

Ah, maybe. After all, I face away from the truth and try to insert my own misunderstandings into the story. On the other hand, Hoshinomori-san accepts reality and acts with a clear mind and open heart—I should be like that!

As my thoughts kept swirling around in my head, Hoshinomori-san changed the subject, feeling that the current discussion had come to a conclusion.

“By the way... Tendo-san, are you on bad terms with Keita?”

“...Eh?”

The unexpected question made me look up and put a pause on my troubled thoughts about Amano-kun’s girlfriend.

Hoshinomori-san continued, tilting her neck in curiously.

“Um, that is, I don’t really know about the relationship between you two. Um, I know that you invited Keita to the Gamers Club, and that he refused, but nothing else...”

“Yea, that sounds about right, There’s nothing wrong there.”

“Fumu fumu. That means that Keita and Tendo-san have slightly delicate relationship... or, speaking frankly, it’s not a very good relationship... right?”

“That’s...”

While I was at a loss for words of explanation, Hoshinomori-san kept talking.

“However, Tendo-san, you came to one of the Gamers Hobby Club meetings a few days ago, no? Even though Keita was there. So I thought that maybe there was no way to turn down the offer, but... after all, the two of you converse pretty awkwardly. Especially Keita—he’s very brash and rude towards me, but when he talks to you, he’s strangely obedient.”

“T-that’s because your relationship is somewhat special...”

“Even so. I always thought that the relationship between Keita and Tendo-san was always strange. Then then, how is it actually? Are you on bad terms? D-do you consider Keita a horrible person just like I do? *tremble*”

“Eh, ah, no, that’s...”

I involuntarily hesitated. Now that she mentioned it... my relationship with Amano-kun is strange.

Just like she said, Amano-kun is probably aware of me. Even when he rejected my invitation to the club, he probably did so with his tail in between his legs.

Then, what about me?"

"(Regarding the matter of the Gamers Club... it's too bad, but even now, I'm not really mad.)"

Honestly, right after he rejected my invitation, I immediately flared up in an emotion similar to anger and thought "Why!", but contrary to my own expectations, that feeling vanished right away.

...But then, why, and when, did it vanish?

"(...Oh right. Certainly, when I saw him arguing with Uehara-kun... he...)"

I know... that he seriously considered the Gamers Club... and me. And...

At that point, I noticed that my cheeks felt unusually hot. Hoshinomori-san looked at my face in worry.

"W-w-what's wrong, Tendo-san!? Your face is red! Are you okay!?"

Hoshinomori-san was sincerely worried about me. She's so similar to Amano-kun—a nice, pure person. As I thought, she's much more suitable for him than Aguri-san.

"Ugu!?"

"T-tendo-san!?"

"T-there's a weird stinging feeling in my chest...!"

"Isn't that really serious!? S-should I call an ambulance...!?"

"Wait, Hoshinomori-san!"

I stopped her in a panic as she reached for her smartphone.

She was looking at me with a worried face. I smiled at her to reassure her.

= "Honestly, heating up, fast heartbeat, and pain are common symptoms for me. That's why it's fine!"

"Isn't that excessively bad!? Rather, why haven't you gone to the hospital yet!?"

"I don't know. It's just that my mind screams, 'It's not a hospital-related issue!'"

"Are you a spoiled child!? You're not a child, so please go to the hospital!"

"... ...And if I said no?"

"What kind of argument is that!? I-it's also bad to say that with such a serious face! N-no matter what you say, e-even if you hate me, I'm going to call an ambulance!"

Like a mother who scolds a bad child—strict, yet gentle... with teary eyes, Hoshinomori-san reached for her phone once again.

In this clumsy yet kind girl, I see traces of Amano-kun... as my heart strangely calmed down, and as my red cheeks cooled down, I gave her a sincere, honest smile.

"I'm already fine."

"... ...C-certainly, you look like you're already fine, but... but..."

Even now, Hoshinomori-san didn't put away her smartphone. I smiled at her again, and walked towards downtown again. Hoshinomori-san hurriedly followed after me and walked next to me.

"...Y-you're really fine... right?"

"Yes, definitely. Thanks, Hoshinomori-san."

"N-no, I didn't do much... ...or, um, rather, I'm sorry..."

"? Why are you apologizing?"

"Um... um, I made a commotion for no reason... n-now that I think back on what I did, it was an overreaction... oh... how embarrassing..."

This time, it was Hoshinomori-san who turned red. Burying her face in her hands, she groaned in embarrassment.

I watched her feeling somewhat peaceful for a while... then, looking up at the evening sky, I brought up the previous topic once again.

“...The feeling I have towards Hoshinomori-san is the same as I feel towards Amano-kun.”

“Heh? Your feelings towards me... is the same as your feelings for Keita?”

Hoshinomori-san stopped covering up her face and tilted her neck. I smiled and said, “Yea”, and after thinking for a tiny bit, she answered with a difficult expression.

“...The same as a lowlife being that should go disappear from this world?”

“Your evaluation of Amano-kun is so low that it scares me.”

“Ehehe, how embarrassing.”

“Yea, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

We continued to banter back and forth. Afterwards, I smiled at her again and honestly told her my feelings without being embarrassed.

“I want to be friends with you... and get to know you better.”

“...”

Hoshinomori-san stopped in an instant and looked at me in a daze. I stopped walking as well and looked at her for several seconds. She became flustered so suddenly.

“W-with someone like me!? ...I-I-I am honored!”

“I am honored’, huh?”

I feel like I heard the same words from Amano-kun recently. There’s a limit to how similar you two can be, you know.

“And for Keita to be friends with Tendo-san... it’s too good for him, so he deserves to die!”

“How low is Amano-kun’s existence to you...”

Somehow, I feel a bit sad. To think that there are people this similar, yet so antagonistic towards each other in this world. It’s a bit of a culture shock.

As I was thinking to myself, Hoshinomori-san cleared her throat and averted her eyes away from me, as if to hide her embarrassment.

“I-i-if you’re ok with me, then please take care—”

“Yes, gladly!”

Suddenly, a loud voice interrupted us from somewhere nearby. After looking around again, I noticed that we were right in front of a bar. A cheerful waiter kept repeating the same lines over and over again, as if he was taking multiple orders one after another.

“Yes, gladly!” “Yes, gladly!” “Yes, gladly!”

“...”

And before I noticed... Hoshinomori-san was trembling, looking down at the ground with teary eyes.

“(Ahh, right as I was about to accept her request, that loud waiter just ruined the mood! I can’t say it now! Under these circumstances, I can no longer use the words, ‘Gladly!’ I don’t want to use it! I don’t want to be like the waiter!)”

However, it looked like Hoshinomori-san didn’t have a backup plan. Or rather, the waiter was still saying “Yes, gladly!” over and over again, and so she couldn’t think of any other word. It was the same for me as well.

In the end, after she finally stopped shaking... when I thought that she would look at me with tears in her eyes, she instead turned around and ran away as fast as possible while shouting out loud.

“I’m sorry for some reason—————!”

“I am too for some reason—————!”

I replied in confusion to the girl running away.

I watched her leave until I could no longer see her... and then I feebly smiled

“Why did our meeting go that way... I probably won’t be able to talk to Amano-kun either...”

I was probably much more awkward than I thought I was.

For some reason, I couldn’t sit still when I that thought came to my mind.

“...Start with my honest feelings. Don’t start by rejecting them. And then, be genuine like Hoshinomori-san...”

Eventually, I started to make my way back home, muttering the same words to myself as I walked alone.

Amano Keita

After Aguri-san and I said goodbye to each other, I returned home, had a quick meal with my family, and took a short bath. I hurriedly went to my room, deciding to go to bed early for today.

9 o'clock, night time. I turned off the lights, covered myself with my blankets —then plugged in my game console. The title of the gal game in the console lit up the monitor. I, the otaku boy, smiled.

...N-no, wait. I hesitated when I thought about how helpless I was.

While it is true that I am playing this gal game in my pajamas, hiding from my family, that was my plan from the start. After all...

"(Before I ask Tendo-san to be my friend tomorrow... I want to clear this route at least!)"

With a determined look, I looked at the heroine Frau Heavenly, who was right next to the title of the game, "Golden Tricks".

Yes, today... even if it takes me all night, I have decided to make sure that I will confess successfully without looking at a guide.

"(Then... I feel like I will definitely have the self-confidence tomorrow. I'll have the courage.)"

It's almost like a prayer to a god. But even then, will she even want to become my friend if even the Tendo-san-like heroine is so hard to capture?

"(If Uehara-kun was here, he would say that those two things are completely different matters... I understand it in my mind, but... but, I can't give up. I will capture Frau.)"

I wonder if there are any other boys who play love sim games as seriously as I do.

Skillfully handling my controller, I used my skips to start on capturing Frau.

First of all, being as careful as always, I examined each of the choices that affect Frau, and picked the best response. However, I've tried this method before. Naturally, I was rejected in the end. At 40 minutes, I had reached my first failure.

"(Well, that was to be expected, but... dammit, I still don't know what's wrong.)"

After having been defeated by the game, it was time to wonder about which situations were the most difficult and think, "I don't know where I went wrong." When I keep losing to a strong opponent in an action game because my skills are lacking, I always play with the hope that "I'll get him next time." And even if I eventually throw in the towel because it's impossible, even if my attempts failed, there's some sense of accomplishment. Even if it's a difficult puzzle where all I can do is guess, I can get close.

However, if it's a situation where I can't win, where I can't solve the problem, then it's different.

For example, a situation where an opponent's attack that was easily avoidable mysteriously becomes a direct hit. Or a solution to a puzzle where I think, "This is definitely the answer!"—and the answer turns out to be wrong. Whenever such situations happen, I feel the cruel despair in my heart.

Furthermore, if it wasn't a bug, I just give up.

Trying to capture Frau is exactly that. Also, this game has so many choices that it would be unrealistic to try every combination possible... If I wanted to do that, I would've just looked up a walkthrough. I want to capture her with my own efforts.

"(I've already tried everything that I thought was right... anything more would be useless. ...Then... I honestly don't feel trying any more, but...)"

After that, I started my second attempt. This time... I tried thinking differently.

"(Then, I'll try to make her hate me this time!)"

Well, if this actually clears her route, I'd feel complicated...

While having those thoughts, I finally got to the confession scene. Well, like

expected, I was brusquely rejected. Second attempt—failure.

“(That was expected. I didn’t deliver Frau’s lost item, and I ran away as fast as possible when Frau was having a hard time. There’s no reason she would fall in love with someone like that.)”

Rather, in the first place, it’s strange that the staff would choose to put in these bad choices. It’s so bad I would suspect that it was one of Irem’s works.
[10]

However, I still don’t get it. Roughly speaking, the choices that I select are most likely correct. Even then, my confession always fails. What in the world...

While agonizing about my troubles, I continued to play and aimlessly tried over and over again. Once I finished two more runs, I put down the controller, lied down, and covered myself with the blankets. ...It was about to become midnight.

“(...Is this a hint that I’m fatally incompatible with someone like Tendo-san in the first place...?)”

I realized that I still couldn’t see the light from here. The route that is an easy clear for the rest of the world is impossible for me. ...Even games, my favorite thing in the world, just showed me once again why I was a loner.

“(...Am I being conceited...?)”

I’m aware that the difference between Tendo-san and I is like the moon and a turtle. But the thing that irritates me is... the fact that I still hold onto the ridiculous dream of getting closer to Tendo-san. ...Even though I was the one to reject her invitation. I’m a shameful, lowlife person. But... but...

“...”

I quickly got up and grabbed the controller again. If it was the old me, I would’ve given up already. Because I play games to have fun, or something like that. Because there’s no point in doing something impossible.

My fundamental values remain the same. However...

“(This game... isn’t just to play! I don’t want to give up so easily!)”

With renewed determination, I tried again for the 5th time. However, right as

I reached the first set of choices, I noticed that my smartphone's notification light was blinking.

"(Oh right, I turned off vibration and sound to focus on the game.)"

I stopped playing, unlocked my phone and checked my notifications.

There was a notification from the messaging application that Aguri forcibly downloaded, and one from my social networking game.

"(Oh, it's from Aguri-san and Uehara-kun. Wow, I'm super happy.)"

Even though I received a text message when I first downloaded the application, this was my first time getting a message after that.

"(Ahh, I get to experience things like this in my life too...)"

I received a chat from a friend. ... After savoring the small happiness I got from the message, I cheerfully looked at the message from Aguri-san.

<Amano-chi, you should go to sleep and look forward for tomorrow!>

<Your complexion is reaaaallly important in affecting other's impressions>

<Don't play games all night!>

<Ah, but even Amano-chi isn't that stupid. Sorry. Good night!>

"I'm really sorrryyyyy!"

I kneeled on the bed and prostrated myself towards my smartphone. I then immediately sent a reply.

<Thank you very much for your concern! This unworthy Amano feels very honored! Farewell!>

I sent some strange texts because I was nervous. Even then, I feel like my enthusiasm got through at least.

After calming down and controlling my breath, this time, I opened Uehara-kun's message.

<Hey Amano, I heard you're planning on talking to Tendo tomorrow>

<If that's the case, I'll gather some people because it'll be a special event!>

<Let's do it in a huge crowd, this event!>

<Then if Tendo becomes friends with you, your standing will increase immediately!>

<Yea, it's a good idea, a good idea! That's why I'm acting quickly!>

<Well, if you fail, everyone will see lololololol>

"That isn't something to 'lololololol' abooooouuuuuuuuttttttttt!"

What is he doing!? This person, what the actual hell is he doing!? Uehara-kun!? Aren't you having way too much fun!? No, he's been having way too interested in my relationships to begin with! Also, why is he assuming that I'll succeed!? Does my relationship with Tendo-san look that good!?

I immediately started typing out a reply in a panic.

"Let's say, 'Don't do anything excessive...' ..."

But at that point, I went back and deleted what I just wrote. After thinking about it for a short while, I started typing again.

<Thank you. Although Uehara-kun's expectations may be, frankly, a bit too high, I will do my best to meet them> I let out a sigh.

"...For someone who worked this much for me... I can't reply with such a harsh tsukkomi."

He's overestimating the relationship between me and Tendo-san, and I can't help but think that his help is too excessive.

Even then, he's a friend that has always helped me, I can't help but feel thankful.

Afterwards, I pressed the home button and opened the social networking game. It looks like I received a message from someone. How strange.

I quickly opened it, and... like I thought, it was from the only player I talk with, MONO.

<Let's do our best>

It was only one sentence—like always, it was plain and simple. I think they probably want me to participate in defeating the current raid boss (a limited time boss).

“(MONO is probably a shy, awkward person.)”

But that’s why I really like that person. ...I’m saved by our tiny connection.

<Yup, let’s do our best>

I sent my own short reply, finished the quest, checked that I received no further messages from Uehara-kun and Aguri-san, then turned off my phone.

However, for a while... I continued to look at my smartphone.

“(...Thank you Aguri-san, Uehara-kun, MONO.)”

I realized that despite feeling like the lowest of the low a few minutes ago, I felt a lot better right now.

With renewed fighting spirit, I set my smartphone aside, grabbed my controller and looked at the screen.

On the screen, it was the main character’s childhood friend, not Frau. The first set of choices in the game is deciding whether or not to walk home with her or not.

Naturally, to aim for Frau, I had to make sure to stay away from her. Like always, I was about to refuse her offer— “...Wait.”

Right then, I suddenly stopped my hand. ...Maybe...

It was an idea that never came to me before. However, a strange conviction filled my heart.

Using the D-pad, I scrolled over to the option to accept her invitation and selected it.

“(Maybe...)”

While thinking, “This may work”, I went through the playthrough, being nice to everyone and not just to Frau. I went on dates with my childhood friend, helped out my kouhai, and cheerfully did favors for my senpai. This is usually a strategy seldom used for any route other than the harem end. I made sure to

not go on that route, though.

Of course, using such a method also decreases my time with Frau. My date event with Frau was still out of reach. However, even then...

“(This is... perhaps...)”

I kept acting according to my strange conviction in my heart and got closer to all the heroines.

At last—I reached the confession scene.

Like always, the main character started talking first.

“Please... please go out with me!”

I had been hearing those words too many times to count over the past few days. And then, Frau would also say the same words with a troubled face— “... I’m glad...”

“Eh?”

My reaction and the main character’s reaction were the same. After all, Frau...

Frau had a tear-stained, yet delightful, expression—one that I had never seen before.

With a slightly embarrassed smile... and with tears dripping down her cheeks, she responded.

“Yes, please take care of me. ...My kind hero that I love.”

Her smile looked like it was wrapped in light as the scene faded out and the ending credits started to roll.

“...”

However, I continued to look at the screen, feeling dumbfounded.

“(Did I... clear it?)”

I can’t believe it at all. I can’t believe it because I was completely stuck and thought it was nearly impossible. I thought that the best I could do was to look

at a guide or give up.

Even then, this time... I was able to reach the ending. Furthermore, using my own power—

“(...No, that's wrong.)”

orrecting myself, I looked at my smartphone that I put to the side. ...It was thanks to Aguri-san, Uehara-kun, and MONO that I realized that I shouldn't “focus only on my relationship with Frau”.

No matter how much I love a person, it doesn't mean that I should treat everyone else rudely. That's obvious. This world doesn't consist of only two people.

...For a loner like me... because I was someone who was so desperate to make a single friend, that thought never came to me. That's why only I was unable to capture Frau... who cared about everyone around her and treated them as important people.

“...Thank you.”

Once again, I turned towards my smartphone and showed my gratitude.

After watching through and enjoying the final moments, closing with Frau's smiling expression, I turned off the game console and lied down under the blankets.

Right now, I don't feel nervous at all. However, it's a bit different from feeling confident.

...I realized something.

“(Even if Tendo-san hates me... I'm already happy.)”

I looked at my smartphone lying next to my bed.

If that's the case... I wonder what I'm afraid of right now.

With the covers up to my neck, I fell into a deep sleep while thinking over and over again about the main character's gallant figure in “Golden Tricks”.

Uehara Tasuku

During lunch, Tendo is going to go see Amano again.

I heard the news from students of class F when I got to school.

It wasn't certain, there was no proof, and in the first place, no one knew that I spread the rumor... so it was a rumor that had no credibility at all.

However, that's why people were so interested. Actually...

"Nee nee, tell me the truth, Uehara!"

Mika, who loved to gossip, grabbed onto the rumors and started talking about the subject like I thought she would. She doesn't know that I'm the source of those rumors.

It was before homeroom in the morning. As Amano entered the classroom, clearly confused by the mood, and looked at my direction, acting a bit suspiciously. I replied, "Who knows?" to Mika.

"I'm not really close to Tendo. I don't know her every move."

"Hmm~? Ah, no way~."

Mika pulled back, seemingly understanding. Looking around the room, I noticed the suspicious gazes of Reina nad Daiki who are particularly perceptive. I averted my eyes from the two of them and thought back on the morning.

Actually, my reply to Mika was about half truth, half lie. It is true that I'm not that close to Tendo, but I did ask her to come to class F during lunch break.

"I think Amano has something important to say, so come over to my class during lunch."

When I went to class A and told her early in the morning, Tendo's face was blank.

"(It's probably since getting called out for a confession during lunch is an ordinary thing now.)"

Once I told her that Amano had something important to talk about, it was clear that she was disturbed upset, her eyes swimming. However, she didn't blush, so she probably didn't misunderstand that as a confession. Or maybe Tendo has a bad imagination.

"(Well, in Tendo's case, she's always rejected by Amano in the first place.)"

He rejected her club invitation, always gets in a fuss with Hoshinomori and Aguri, and always talks about his different values about gaming. Since someone like that has "something important to say", she would obviously be more wary than happy.

However, this is another one of riajuu Uehara Tasuku's ingenious tactics.

"(If she goes in thinking that it'll be something bad, the chances of the friend request being successful goes up!)"

Yes, this is one of the basic techniques of business and fraud. It's the same thing as marking up a product that originally costs 50,000 yen up to 100,000 yen, then holding a big 50% off sale and bringing the price back to 50,000 yen. The buyer leaves feeling like they saved money.

After making Tendo feel anxious, she'll spend the morning having thoughts like "Is it about not joining the Gamers Hobby Club?", or "Have I been rude to Amano-kun lately?", or "Maybe he's going to tell me to stop being concerned with him because it makes him stand out..." However, once she hears Amano's actual question... "Please become friends with me"—she'll immediately feel relieved!

Afterwards, Tendo would reply with "Oh, if it was about that, then of course it's fine", and the chance of success will practically be a 100%!

"Fufufu... Amano, this is how winners act."

"Tasuku, what are you muttering with such a smug look?"

I realized that I looked creepy to Masaya. Clearing my throat once, I stood up and left the classroom to go to the bathroom. On my way, I sent a look towards Amano.

As I walked in the hallway slowly, I heard the footsteps of someone jogging

towards me from behind.

“What is it, Uehara-kun?”

Amano asked while walking next to me. I sent him a sidelong glance and replied.

“Oh, come with me to the bathroom, Amano. I have something to talk about that’s difficult to say in the classroom.”

“...”

“Hey, why are you pulling back?”

I noticed that Amano had stopped walking.

“...Sorry Uehara-kun, I don’t swing that way...”

“Hey wait, you bastard. If you make a misunderstanding like that I’m going to get super angry at you.”

After sending him another sharp look, Amano silently walked next to me again. After letting out a sigh, I started talking about the issue at hand.

“Uehara-kun. Tendo-san is coming to the classroom at lunch. Why?”

“Oh, you already heard about it? Who told you?”

“Your conversation with your friends.”

“You’re the same gloomy, eavesdropping loner as always.”

“I think it’s better than a bully who sets up other people’s confessions on their own.”

Amano replied, looking sullen. For some reason, it seems like he’s somewhat seriously mad. I forgot about this lately, but he doesn’t like to yield, and is the unexpectedly aggressive type.

Once we walked away from the classrooms and arrived at the bathroom, which didn’t have many people walking around, I leaned against the wall.

“It was my bad to do things on my own. But if you don’t like it, I’ll undo everything I’ve done.”

“I-if I don’t like it...”

As Amano hesitated, I continued on.

"Yea. Actually, since you were going to talk to her today, you would've probably come to me to call Tendo, right? I think it's too high of a hurdle for you to go directly to class A and call out to her."

"Uu... T-that's true, but..."

In the past, he was super nervous to even call out to Hoshinomori, who's also a loner. I think it's impossible for him to call out to someone like Tendo in class A.

Amano was shaking—I must've hit the bull's eye. Even then, he sent a dissatisfied glare at me.

"I'm thankful for setting this up for me, but... but couldn't you make it more private? It's not the two of us, but do your friends and acquaintances really have to be there?"

"Didn't you get my message? If you do it in front of a lot of people... in other words, we're also aiming to increase your social position by doing it in front of class F."

"I don't want to increase my social standing and get along with Tendo-san at the same time."

Amano looked at me with a manly look that shocked me slightly. ...Seriously, this guy is troublesome as always. That's also one of his good parts... but that's also the biggest reason I can't be a casual friend.

I scratched my head and replied with my own logic.

"...I already said this before when we were arguing, but I think that even the most superficial of relationships are important."

"..."

"If I use your words, what is useless to you is important to me and other people. In anime, manga... and even games, there's no one, not even a rock, that doesn't care about their social standing. Since I think it's necessary to live, I think I have help you out."

"That's....:

Amano's eyes wavered. ...Right now, I'm acting selfishly. Fundamentally, he's the type to put priority on his own hobbies and his own wishes. His sense of priority is different than mine, so it's strange that I'm pushing my logic onto him.

But even then...

"Hey Amano, what type of person do you think I hate the most?"

"What now? ...Are you trying to say that you hate indecisive people like me?"

"Regrettable, but that's wrong. That's the type of person I hate the second most."

"I am pretty disliked!"

"The type of person I hate the most is..."

I looked at his eyes as I paused for effect.

"People who wish to hold onto their 'honor of not fussing over honor or social status'."

"..."

"I could respect a fool that really didn't have any aspirations or was super prideful. However, staying aloof because they believe that they're so cool even though they're alone isn't a difference in belief or a way of thinking; it's just the carelessness of a narcissist who lacks ambition."

"...That's harsh."

"No, I wasn't talking about you. All I was saying is that either way, you're the stupid type."

"H-how embarrassing."

"That's not a compliment."

"Is that so..."

Amano looked despondent. This guy's emotions are really hectic. Wait, that might be my fault.

...Well, can't help it—I'll simply summarize everything I want to say right now.

"Hey, Amano. This is for your future. Try imagining this for a bit. For example, if you and Tendo become friends... what will the other students think when they see you two walking together?"

"...Ah, I see..."

Amano's eyes opened wide in realization. I continued to talk.

"A relationship that isn't recognized by other people is difficult to maintain, Amano. It might be... a bit overkill to relate it to a story like Romeo and Juliet, but there isn't a healthy relationship in this world that lasts if it's only recognized by the people in the relationship."

"I guess. It's strange that I'm trying to get closer to Tendo-san for no reason, after all."

No, I didn't go that far. Rather, it would be a pain to follow up, so I just continued to say what I wanted to say.

"In other words, that's why it's good to have a few people see you ask her to be your friend. It's also good to do it in a place with some distant acquaintances who will irresponsibly spread the information about it. Maybe an area like downtown where strangers walk by. And, to fulfill all the conditions, somewhere where it's easy to ask her—"

"Class 2-F! There's lots of people, and enough time during lunch break!"

"Yup, it's perfect."

I smiled. For some reason, Amano looked really excited and grabbed my hand.

"As expected of Uehara-kun! You're amazing! Sorry, I was being foolish! Thank you! Thank you very much!"

"No, no, I did nothing."

I stayed humble. Right then, the chime rang through the hallway. Letting out a voice in panic, he returned to the classroom. While chasing after him... I secretly let out a crooked smile.

"(—But that was all a superficial reason!)"

While looking at his back, I laughed evilly.

“(My true aim is to see how Aguri will look!)”

Naturally, Aguri will also come to today’s lunch event to watch.

When Amano asks Tendo to be his friend... I’ll be hidden among many students and will be properly able to observe Aguri! I may be nice to Amano, but I also have my doubts—she’s my girlfriend!

“(In a circumstance where only Amano’s acquaintances are watching, Aguri might try to conceal her actual reaction! That’s how it is in a classroom full of people! However, it’s difficult to completely hide your reaction! Since everyone’s eyes will be on Tendo, Aguri won’t even have a hint that I’ll be there watching her!)”

That was my aim.

Right when Amano asks Tendo, I have to look for Aguri’s initial reaction.

If Aguri and Amano were really just friends, Aguri would cheerfully support Amano and Tendo’s friendship from the bottom of her heart.

However, if she shows an expression of mixed feelings, then she is definitely cheating. It’s proof that Aguri has been charmed by Amano.

“(...Well, the worst possible reaction is if Aguri awkwardly sees me, who is worthy enough to be her boyfriend, looking at her...)”

I set up this event with Tendo as a facade to see if Aguri and Amano were together... In other words, I cannot be seen. If Aguri looks at me with an awkward expression... Uwa, I’m shaking just from the thought! Well, that still isn’t the worst case!

“(Anyway, this will settle things. I should know Aguri’s true feelings!)”

So, this event is pretending to be “Amano’s friend request”... but it’s actually litmus test for Aguri’s feelings!

“(Don’t underestimate a riajuu’s strategic prowess!)”

I let out a war cry in my mind to no one in particular. However, I feel like my middle school self is still looking down on me—what does this have to do with you!? Be quiet, you studious bastard! Your studying is finally being useful for once!

Yes yes, I also have another reason why I got Amano to ask in front of class 2-F. That would be to get Hoshinomori to see it as well.

“(If there were only a small amount of people, she would definitely not come, but she might watch since there will be a lot of onlookers in this situation. And then, if Amano and Tendo become friends, she’ll feel jealous, and if they don’t become friends, she’ll feel sympathetic for a fellow loner, then develop a crush on him! No matter what happens, I’m a genius!)”

If I say so myself... my mind is terrifyingly sharp. In this world, do you think there are any other high school boys that are this good at manipulating human relationships? Nope, I think not.

As I followed Amano into the classroom and went to my seat, I was no longer able to hold back my grin.

“Fufufu... kuku... kufufufufu!”

“No, Tasuku. Honestly, you’re so gross today. I wish you weren’t my friend anymore.”

Ignoring Masaya’s words, I marveled at my own professional human relationship skills, and kept laughing creepily.

Aguri

“(Amano-chi’s gonna ask during break, huh...)”

It’s third period right now. Aguri is skillfully spinning her pen as she gazes at the boring kanji written on the blackboard.

“(...Aguri doesn’t mean to incite anything, but honestly, Aguri thinks that something will go wrong...)”

Aguri let out a sigh.

“(Somehow... even though there’s no evidence, Aguri has a hunch that things won’t go as planned. Aguri’s sixth sense is tingling...)”

After hearing Amano-chi’s story, Aguri doesn’t think that there’s no hope at all regarding Tendo-san. After all, Amano-chi is really self-deprecating, so his words didn’t seem like they were just wishful thinking. Also, Aguri thinks that their relationship isn’t bad to begin with. But...

“Somehow, it feels like Amano-chi and Tendo-san have a different relationship than Aguri actually thinks they do. It’s strange.)”

It’s doesn’t seem particularly bad... but if Aguri had to say something, then it feels like their fate is fatally bad?

亜玖璃はペン回しをやめると、ノートに丸と矢印で簡易的な人物相関図を描き始める。

Aguri stopped spinning her pen and started to draw circles and arrows to create a relationship diagram.

“(Amano-chi likes Tendo-san... or rather, admires Tendo-san. Aguri likes Tasuku. No, love. It’d be great if that could be confirmed right now, but...)”

Aguri can’t move her pen anymore. ...Even though there are lines drawn from Tendo-san and Tasuku to Amano-chi and Aguri, Aguri can’t confirm their feelings. Furthermore, with the addition of Hoshinomori Chiaki, things are even more complicated.

“(Amano-chi hates that girl... is what Aguri would like to say, but those two clearly get along well. Yea. Well, it’ll be fine to just write my guesses too.)”

This time, Aguri included all the unconfirmed information too.

“(Tendo-san feels... well... normal? Towards Amano-chi. It doesn’t look like she hates him. And then, Amano-chi and Aguri are comrades. Then, Tasuku’s feelings towards Tendo-san is... love, it seems like.)”

After drawing a line from Tasuku to Tendo-san, Aguri wrote “Love?”. ...The tip of my pen is shaking. ...Uu, don’t cry, Aguri! Don’t cry! Aguri is strong!

“(Well then, the problem is this girl...)”

Hoshinomori Chiaki. She’s honestly harder to read than Tendo-san. Aguri doesn’t know much about her. Well, if Aguri were to write what she does know...

“(Clearly she has feelings... towards Tasuku, right?)”

Again, Aguri drew a line from Hoshinomori Chiaki to Tasuku and wrote, “Love?”. ...Well, Tasuku is the coolest person on the planet, so it can’t be helped that he’s so popular. It’s not a shock. It’s completely not a shock.

The problem is, what does Tasuku think of her...

“(Hoshinomori Chiaki... even Amano-chi says that she’s a quiet, boring otaku girl...)”

For some reason, it seems like Amano-chi tends to underestimate girls, so his words were untrustworthy. Honestly, she’s super cute. However...

“(But Tasuku’s type was... a cheerful, light-hearted girl, right?)”

At least Aguri thought that was the case, so that’s why Aguri is the Aguri now.

But thinking back on it... Tasuku has never been super into the Aguri now! Even back then, Tasuku was always kind to Aguri, and Aguri thought that was really nice, and Aguri really likes him, really really likes, ahh, Tasuku...

“(...Hah! No, no, I got off topic!)”

Aguri has to focus. Not on the lesson, but on this relationship diagram.

“(Thinking about it again... maybe Tasuku just likes everyone.)”

Tasuku's always nice to everyone without discriminating. In other words... he might not like cheerful, light-hearted girls, but he might *also* like cheerful, light-hearted girls.

There are various events lately that line up with this theory. But...

"(Uu...)"

Oh no, tears are forming. What is this, this is bad! Aguri might actually start crying in the classroom. That's no good. A girl who cries about her boyfriend during class is seriously scary. Aguri knows that. Calm down. Calm down, Aguri.

...Fuu. Alright... let's write...

"(The line from Tasuku to Hoshinomori-san is...)"



The tip of the pen kept shaking as Aguri started to write the word “Like”—the pen escaped from the piece of paper. The braid-glasses class chairman sent me a look, but Aguri ignored it and held her head in her hands.

“(What is this great resistance!? When it was Tendo-san, Aguri was barely able to draw the line, but... when Aguri thinks that Tasuku might like Hoshinomori Chiaki, a girl just like the plain, boring Aguri, Aguri hates it!)”

As expected, Aguri won’t allow this. Aguri doesn’t want to allow this. ...No, even though Amano-chi and Aguri already saw the definitive evidence... s-still, Aguri doesn’t know yet! Yea! That’s right! Aguri might be mistaken!

“(Y-yea, Aguri still doesn’t know. So... let’s confirm it again! Let’s do that!)”

Aguri suddenly came up with a good idea and raised her head from her desk.

“(That’s right! Amano-chi’s event at lunch! Let’s measure Tasuku’s feelings then!)”

The new idea lifted Aguri’s spirits.

“(First of all, if Tasuku actually likes Tendo-san, he won’t like Amano-chi’s request. He might be helping since Amano-chi’s his friend and he can’t help it, but... if he doesn’t like it, it’ll definitely show on his face!)”

Also, among a huge crowd, he won’t bother to hide his feelings!

“(And then, if he really likes Hoshinomori-san... Tasuku won’t be looking at Amano-chi, but at Hoshinomori-san instead! He’ll be wondering what Hoshinomori-san thinks of Amano-chi! He’ll definitely look at her reaction!)”

At the very least, Aguri can figure out if Tasuku likes Tendo-san or Hoshinomori-san.

Oh, but...

“(The worst thing that could happen is if Tasuku looks over at Aguri. After all... if he sees his girlfriend while meeting the person he cheated with, mou, I don’t know how a cheater thinks! Well, Tasuku probably won’t do that, though!)”

At any rate, everything Aguri learns during lunch will be the truth.

In other words... Amano-chi’s event has turned into a litmus test to find out

Tasuku's true feelings by focusing on his expressions!

"(Ah, Aguri is such a smart girl! As expected of Tasuku's girlfriend and Amanochi's shishou! Aguri's craftiness is amazing!)"

While ignoring the lesson going on, Aguri let out quiet laughter.

"Ufu... fufu... kufufufu..."

"A-aguri-san?"

Ignoring the class chairman's worried look, Aguri marveled at her own professional human relationship skills, and kept laughing creepily.

Hoshinomori Chiaki

It looks like Tendo-san will go to Keita during lunch.

I heard the information from my classmates during break time—or, more accurately, after I overheard my classmates' conversation, I stopped using up my stamina in my social networking game and contemplated over the information by myself.

“(Tendo-san... has business with Keita? I wonder why...)”

I peeked at Tendo-san. The concerned person was in the middle of the classroom, having a pleasant chat with the other students. As always, she's beautiful, even to me. A sight for sore eyes, one could say. ...For some reason, a sigh leaves my mouth.

“(Obviously, people other than Uehara-san would like her...)”

It'd be absurd to call her my rival in love. There's a huge difference between her and me, who's currently sitting down in the corner of the classroom, playing a social networking game quietly. Or rather, I feel like I haven't said a word since I left the house. Even though it's break time after 3rd period. ...I think my vocal cords are deteriorating.

While thinking about such things, I looked at Tendo-san again. Obviously, the rumors about what will happen at lunch haven't reached her friends in the middle of the classroom. The people talking about the rumors were still hanging around the edge of the classroom, looking towards the middle.

“(Isn't the evidence really weak? No, no... but...)”

I looked at Tendo-san again. ...Fumu.

“(The normal Tendo-san would clearly say whether a rumor was true or not...)”

This aspect of her is really refreshing, and it's probably part of the reason why she's so popular.

Thinking about it that way, even though there are rumors floating around about Keita, the fact that she's not reacting to it shows that the situation isn't normal...

"(W-wait. Is she really going to see Keita...)"

For some reason, I feel uneasy.

"(I mean, I really can't see the reason. She's stopped trying to ask him to the Gamers Club... so for her to go see Keita...)"

Since even I can't tell why, even though I know their circumstances pretty well, other people would be even more doubtful. Well, but...

"(Like the rumors are saying, I don't think it's a confession. Between Keita and Tendo-san... well, at best, it would probably be something like 'please be my friend'?)"

That might be the case. ...I mean, I don't really want to admit it, but Keita and I have a similar sensitivity to things. And for a while now, I've felt restless because I wanted to get closer to Tendo-san, who also likes games.

"(Rather than Tendo-san going to Keita, she was probably called there instead. Class F is more or less Keita's home.)"

After that thought, my curiosity disappeared. I didn't really want to see Keita get rejected by Tendo-san. Since we're so similar, I really want to run away from that.

Letting out a sigh, I went back to my social networking game... but as I reopened the application, my hand stopped suddenly.

"(Huh? Doesn't Keita already have a girlfriend? Aguri-san. Even then, he's calling out to another girl?)"

Although it's probably not related to love, it felt a bit strange. I suddenly remembered Tendo-san's words from the other day.

"(Oh right, Tendo-san... said that 'I feel like Aguri-san is actually dating Uehara-kun'...)"

Honestly, I don't remember it too well, but I feel like that's what she said.

Looking up from my smartphone, I started to fidget again.

“(No, no, that can’t be. After all, I’ve seen Keita and Aguri-san together before. I feel like Keita’s love for Aguri-san is deep...)”

Then, I suddenly hit upon a good idea!

“(Then, then, is Keita’s love for Aguri-san super one-sided!?)”

My body stiffened like it was hit by lightning.

...No way... But everything makes sense that way. I always thought that Keita and Aguri-san didn’t really match, and wondered why a beautiful girl was dating a water flea-like presence. Everything...

“(If we assume that Aguri-san doesn’t have any feelings for him, then various things are explained!)”

My lips trembled.

I-it’s clear to me now. Keita is really the same as I am!

“(After all, Keita and I are super easy!)”

When someone does something remotely nice for us, we stick to them, and if it’s the opposite gender, then we fall in love with them. That’s the history of a loner like Keita and me.

Originally, Aguri-san is like a person from another world for us. However... by some small chance, she must’ve done some minor nice thing for Keita sometime.

“(It’s not strange that Keita fell in love in one blow!)”

Feeling confident, I nodded. In the beginning, Aguri-san would’ve ignored a small flea like Keita. However, that developed into a girlfriend-boyfriend relationship.

How did that happen?

...There’s only one answer.

This is love detective Hoshinomori Chiaki’s excellent love sleuthing skills!

“(Keita is being played with by Aguri-san!)”

This is the only possible truth.

Having glimpsed at one of the frightening mysteries of the world, I trembled.

“(Since Keita’s body isn’t her goal... i-it’s probably money. Asking him to pay at the game center... or, now that I remember, getting him to pay when they went to the cafe together...!)”

The more I think about it, the more I’m convinced.

“(H-how scary. T-that’s why people like us can’t go outside! All riajuus are evil! They’ll have us on the palm of their hand, dressing up as angels even though they’re actually the devil! Oh, but Uehara-san is different.”

I’m amazed at how easy Keita is. Good grief, that hopeless chibi fell in love just because someone was somewhat nice to him. Good grief.

“(I... I have to make sure!)”

I looked up with a determined look. ...I really hate Keita, but I can’t stand to see someone so similar to me get played by a riauju.

“(I-I have to make him see the truth...!)”

I, the love detective, suddenly noticed something.

“(That’s right...! Asking Tendo-san to be his friend... is an SOS from Keita! Since he can’t separate from Aguri-san by his own will, this is the best SOS he can do!)”

Having noticed the desire of someone just like me, small tears formed in my eye.

“(I got it, I got it, Keita. Today’s lunch break. I... having received your message, will go to class F to confirm the truth about the devil! Tendo-san please receive his message as well!)”

I sent a strong look towards Tendo-san, who turned around to look at me, as if she sensed it. In response, I nodded my head in a deliberate manner.

“???”

Tendo-san acted like she was confused. ...Goodness, what a good actor. Since she’s smart, she must’ve noticed all of Aguri-san’s evil deeds, and so decided to

accept Keita the flea's invitation. Why is she such a nice person?

I nodded at Tendo-san once again.

Finally going back to the game I held off on playing... I entered the battle against the voluptuous female raid boss and thoroughly crushed her.

Tendo Karen

It's lunch right now. I'm on my way from class A to class F.

Like always, I was walking down the hall confidently with my chest puffed out... but unlike my outside appearance, I was feeling uneasy inside.

"(Ahh, I don't get it at all! Why did Amano-kun call for me!?)"

After Uehara-kun called out to me first thing in the morning, the doubts and anxiety swirled around in my mind. As I headed towards the stairs to get to class F, I still couldn't think of a reason.

Passing in front of class C, I was still frantically thinking for a reason.

"(Honestly, the most likely thing is... breaking off relations.)"

The blood drained from my face. I didn't want to think about that case, but when I think about our delicate relationship, it's the most probable answer.

"(For someone who likes to play games calmly, interacting with someone like me does great damage to that and gives him no advantages at all. Whenever we meet, he looks uncomfortable...)"

And then there are the troubles with the Gamers Club too. Amano-kun and I still feel awkward about that incident.

And, ordinarily, it's really strange that Amano-kun and I still talk now and then. In the end, I also refused his invitation to the Gamers Hobby Club, so we're not really related in any way. Even then, we still went on a walk for some reason.

Also, I know that I'm more or less a special person here. It's just a fact; I'm not trying to brag.

"(Since Amano-kun is a timid person... talking with someone like me is a definite no...)"

It's not like he's being excessively self-conscious. It's a fact that I stand out.

It's not something I'm particularly proud of... but I wonder. Is that also suspicious? At the very least, I thought that Amano-kun would naturally join the Gamers Club because I invited him, but maybe that was being too haughty.

"(I'm... probably an annoying person to him.)"

I'm confident in my abilities. I'm also aware of the effort I put in. I think my popularity and my reliability have to do with my effort and my ability.

But honestly, I think it's questionable if I'm a "charming person".

"(At least... Amano-kun probably doesn't trust me.)"

The way he acts with me is clearly different than how he interacts with Uehara-kun and Hoshinomori-san.

He's always flustered whenever he talks with me... and always... looks uncomfortable... and, only talks clearly to say that his opinions differ from mine.

"(That's... no matter how you put it, our relationship is bad.)"

Passing by class D, I let out a small sigh, trying not to let others see it.

Feeling a tiny bit depressed... in the next moment, I looked to the front and let out my fighting spirit.

"(Hold on, Tendo Karen! Even if you encounter a bad situation, at least you can make it through by behaving like your usual self!)"

The girl known as Tendo Karen is resilient in the most crucial moments. No matter how much I may waver, in important moments, I can conduct myself with firm resolve, as if I was confident from the very beginning.

Passing by class E, I warned myself.

"(Under these circumstances, you have to prepare yourself, Tendo Karen! You have to respond honestly and truthfully!)"

Yes, I will honestly and truthfully face myself. Using Misumi-kun's advice and the practice I got with Hoshinomori-san, now is the time to put it into action.

"(First, I will listen to Amano-kun's words sincerely. Afterwards, I won't put on a strange facade and reject, but I will answer him with my honest feelings.)"

There's nothing to it. The essence of everything is always simple.

“(I will face Amano-kun from the front. That’s it.)”

With renewed determination, I walked into class F with an invigorating smile.

“Excuse me. Is Amano-kun here?”

Amano Keita

“Excuse me. Is Amano-kun here?”

When Tendo-san appeared at the entrance, my heart felt like it was going to jump out of my mouth.

“(S-she came! She came!)”

Although I prepared for it the whole day, I didn’t believe that she would come and say my name, and I was starting to think that she might not come.

“I-I’m h-h-here!”

All of the gazes in the room turned to Tendo-san. I stood up while raising my hand as I trembled all over.

As I did so, all the gazes turned towards me. ...U-uu!

Tendo-san was composed like always and had an elegant smile—she looked like a model with her beautiful posture and her gait as she walked towards me.

In the crowded classroom, filled with people from other classes who had heard the rumor, Tendo-san was like Moses parting the red sea as she walked.

I felt the same dizziness from the attention I got when I was invited to the Gamers Club, but uehara-kun grabbed my arm and said “Hey”, bringing me back to my sense.

Looking around the classroom, I obviously saw Uehara-kun, and Aguri-san in the distance... and, looking like she had followed Tendo-san, I saw Chiaki poking her head out around the entrance.

And, those four people... unlike the other onlookers, who were smirking at the situation, they all had earnest expressions.

“(Everyone... to go so far... for me...)”

I was really moved. Even though I don’t want to include seaweed girl... well, I guess she’s still a friend. I’m grateful.

“Good afternoon, Amano-kun.”

Standing in front of me, Tendo-san greeted me with a smile. For a moment, my throat was blocked and I sounded like a domesticated chicken as I stuttered out, “G-g-g-g, goo—！”, but looking at Uehara-kun and everyone’s faces again... I calmed down my mind, looked straight at Tendo-san, and replied confidently.

“Good afternoon, Tendo-san. Sorry for calling you here today.”

“No, it’s fine. Then...”

Tendo-san hesitated for a moment, but immediately recovered and asked me a question with a smile.

“Then, Amano-kun. What business do you have with me today?”

“Y-yea. About that...that’s...”

Right then, I noticed that all the gazes in the classroom were focused on us.

“(T-that’s natural. Until now, everyone was just glancing at us... everyone must have noticed that ‘things are starting now’ and are looking over here...)”

I was conscious of all the attention that we were gathering.

“...?”

Tendo-san tilted her neck as I sunk into silence. While trying to ignore the surroundings, I continued to talk with trembling lips.

“U-um, that’s, um... um... i-it’s really hard to say, but...”

“!”

Right then, Tendo-san’s face looked really sad. I tilted my neck, thinking that her reaction was odd.

“? T-tendo-san? What’s wrong?”

“N-no, it’s nothing. Continue, Amano-kun. ...I am prepared.”

“H-ha.”

Wait, “prepared”? I’m only asking her to be my friend—is that really necessary?

But then, I just realized!

“(O-oh! She’s prepared to refuse!)”

I was astonished. ...I guess my loss has already been determined.

Tendo-san spoke up as I stood still.

“Amano-kun? What is it?”

“Huh? Oh, no... it’s noth—...”

I slumped my shoulders in disappointment and replied.

“(...Should... should I just quit?)”

I abruptly looked up.

After all, this... this has no meaning. It’s pointless to be bold here.

It’s like using up a valuable recovery item during the boss fight that determines whether or not I lose.

“Um... Tendo-san. It’s really noth—...”

While talking, I peaked at Uehara-kun to see if he was angry.

However, he was...

“(Eh? It looks like he’s not even looking!)”

I don’t get it. He was looking at somewhere else with much focus.

Or rather, I noticed that Aguri-san and even Chiaki weren’t even looking. ... What is this. What are you guys doing? Why is everyone looking somewhere else...

“(Hah! That’s wrong! This... that’s right!)”

I noticed their aim. They’re not trying to be cruel. If they were so heartless, they wouldn’t have come in the first place. They didn’t come just because they were curious. They must be seeing how things are going with me and Tendo-san.

But then, what are they looking at?

There’s only one answer.

“(Everyone... everyone’s being so considerate...!)”

Knowing that I'm weak to attention, seeing my heart get discouraged... everyone's so considerate!

They're trying to reduce my burden by looking away! Really, even though they want to watch, even though things won't change!

"(Everyone... all this... for me...!)"

Inside my heart, a light shone once again.

Suddenly, I recalled... the events of last night, when I cleared "Golden Tricks".

"(I see... that's right. I'm borrowing everyone's power... Even if I think I'll lose, that doesn't mean I can't try my best!)"

What do you mean, "because my loss has been determined". Do I intend to show my back as I shamelessly scurry home after having borrowed the strength of my amazing friends?

That's wrong, Amano Keita!

Even though I'm a mob character and not the main character of a story, that doesn't matter now!

This is, as a person, as a man, what I should do! In other words...

"(Showing my friends my proud loss... this is a man!)"

Having resolved myself, I looked at Tendo-san with an earnest gaze.

"...!"

To my change in attitude, Tendo-san sat up straight, and the tension in the class rose.

I looked at my friends, who were looking somewhere else just like before, and smiled.

I started to talk with courage.

"Tendo-san, please—"

Uehara Tasuku

“(Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Why is Aguri looking at me super awkwardlyyyyyy!?)”

While Amano and Tendo’s event moved along nicely, I... was amazed how I was able to guess the worst reaction that Aguri could have.

“(I-i-if she’s looking at me in this situation... that means... that means that she’s completely in love with Amano, and is thinking how easy I was to triiicccckkkkkk!)”

But what is that super awkward expression!? I’m the one that feels awkward! It’s been decided! Let alone cheating, doesn’t that mean that he’s your favorite!? That’s a lie! But before I knew it... with Amano...!

Then, in an unrelated matter to my intense shaking—

“Tendo-san, please—”

—Before I knew it, the climax of Amano’s event had come.

Aguri

“(Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Why is Tasuku looking at Aguri super awkwardlyyyyy!?)”

While Amano-chi and Tendo-san’s event moved along nicely, Aguri... was amazed how Aguri was able to guess the worst reaction that Tasuku could have.

“(I-i-if Tasuku’s looking at Aguri in this situation... it means... it means that Tasuku is a player who goes around seducing girls! Not Tendo-san, not Hoshinomori-san, but he’s awkwardly looking at Aguri, his girlfriend... this is definite proof that he’s cheatiiiiinnnnngggggg!)”

But what is that super awkward expression!? Aguri’s the one that feels awkward! Isn’t it certain now!? It’s been decided! It’s been decided that he’s a cheater! This is a lie, right!? But when... when did he abandon Aguri...!

Then, in an unrelated matter to Aguri’s intense shaking—

“Tendo-san, please—”

—Before Aguri knew it, the climax of Amano-chi’s event had come.

Hoshinomori Chiaki

“(Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Why are Uehara-san and Aguri-san are looking at each other super awkwardlyyyyy!?)”

While Keita and Tendo’s event moved along nicely, I... was amazed how I was able to guess the worst reaction that the two of them could have.

“(I-i-if they’re looking at each in this situation... that means... that means that they’re secretly dating, and are purposely thinking back on uncomfortable memories to pretend there’s nothing going onnnnnnnn!)”

But what is that super awkward expression!? I’m the one that feels awkward! Isn’t it certain now!? It’s been decided! Doesn’t that mean that she’s using Keita for her convenience and is actually going out with Uehara-san!? Or rather, is she using Uehara-san too!? This is a lie, right!? But before I knew it... leave Keita alone...!

Then, in an unrelated matter to my intense shaking—

“Tendo-san, please—”

—Before I knew it, the climax of Keita’s event had come.

Amano Keita

“Tendo-san, please—”

Right as I said those first few words, the various events that happened recently flashed before my eyes like a revolving lantern.

Miyamoto-san, who wanted a copy of Kurikure 3, Chiaki, who I argued with in our meetings of the Gamers Hobby Club, Misumi-kun, who somehow won a game tournament, and Tendo-san, who I had a medal game showdown with.

And, the most memorable one being the most recent event.

Those unsuccessful endings of “Golden Tricks” that I saw over and over again. Even now, the words of the main character still stuck to my dreams.

Yesterday’s meeting with Aguri-san at the family restaurant. There, I decided to ask Tendo-san. I decided to imitate Aguri-san’s simple, anticlimactic confession.

Gathering my determination through my memories, I paused once in my words.

I cleared my throat, as if to clear the air of all the tension.

And then, once again,

Thinking of the confession scene of “Golden Tricks” and Aguri-san’s stories, I looked into Tendo-san’s eyes and started over.

“Tendo-san, please—”

Tendo Karen

“Tendo-san, please—”

As Amano-kun started to talk with such an earnest look, I went over everything that had happened since yesterday.

Misumi-kun saw how coldly I rejected a confession and admonished me about how I was using my facade, then I tried it on Hoshinomori-san.

“(First, reply with my honest feelings. Then, don’t immediately say a rejection...)”

Ever since then, I’ve been constantly telling myself that.

“(It’s wrong to immediately reject someone I just met like I always do. He... Amano-kun is one of the people I respect the most. These are his words. Even if this is his rejection of me. I... have the obligation to reply to his words from the bottom of my heart without a facade.)”

I resolved myself. Looking determined as well, he started to talk again.

“Tendo-san, please—”

This is just right. Following my beliefs of “not starting with a rejection” and “replying with my honest feelings”, I cut into his words slightly as I responded with a positive reply.

“Yes—”

Amano Keita

With many students looking on, the fateful moment had come.



"Tendo-san, please go out with me."

"Yes, gladly."

...

...

...Oh, that wasn't what I meant to say—

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

In that moment, the whole group let out surprised voices that shook the whole building.

—Thus, on this day,

An unprecedented event that no one expected—even the people involved—occurred; on this day, in this classroom, an unexpected couple was accidentally created between two very different people.

Notes and References

1. [↑] Flying Get means pre-ordering and obtaining items such as books, CDs, and DVDs before the date they officially go on sale.
2. [↑] Frau means woman in German. So, her name means “heavenly woman”.
3. [↑] In these next few paragraphs, there are a lot of parts where I think there are references, but I don’t really watch/read too many series, so I have no idea what they refer to. If anyone knows, please comment!
4. [↑] The Japanese word used for “virgin” here (童貞) typically refers to boys/males.
5. [↑] Sawayaka 3 kumi is a Japanese educational TV show geared towards kids.
6. [↑] Capcom loves crashing their helicopters.
7. [↑] Zenryoukuzaka is a TV show about female idols running.
8. [↑] KISUMAI BUSAKU is a TV show about males trying to prove how cool they are.
9. [↑] A spell of restoration from Dragon Quest when they were actually used.
10. [↑] Irem is a video game company that produces arcade and early console games.

Gamers! - Volume 02 - Tendou Karen to Fuiuchi Happy End

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